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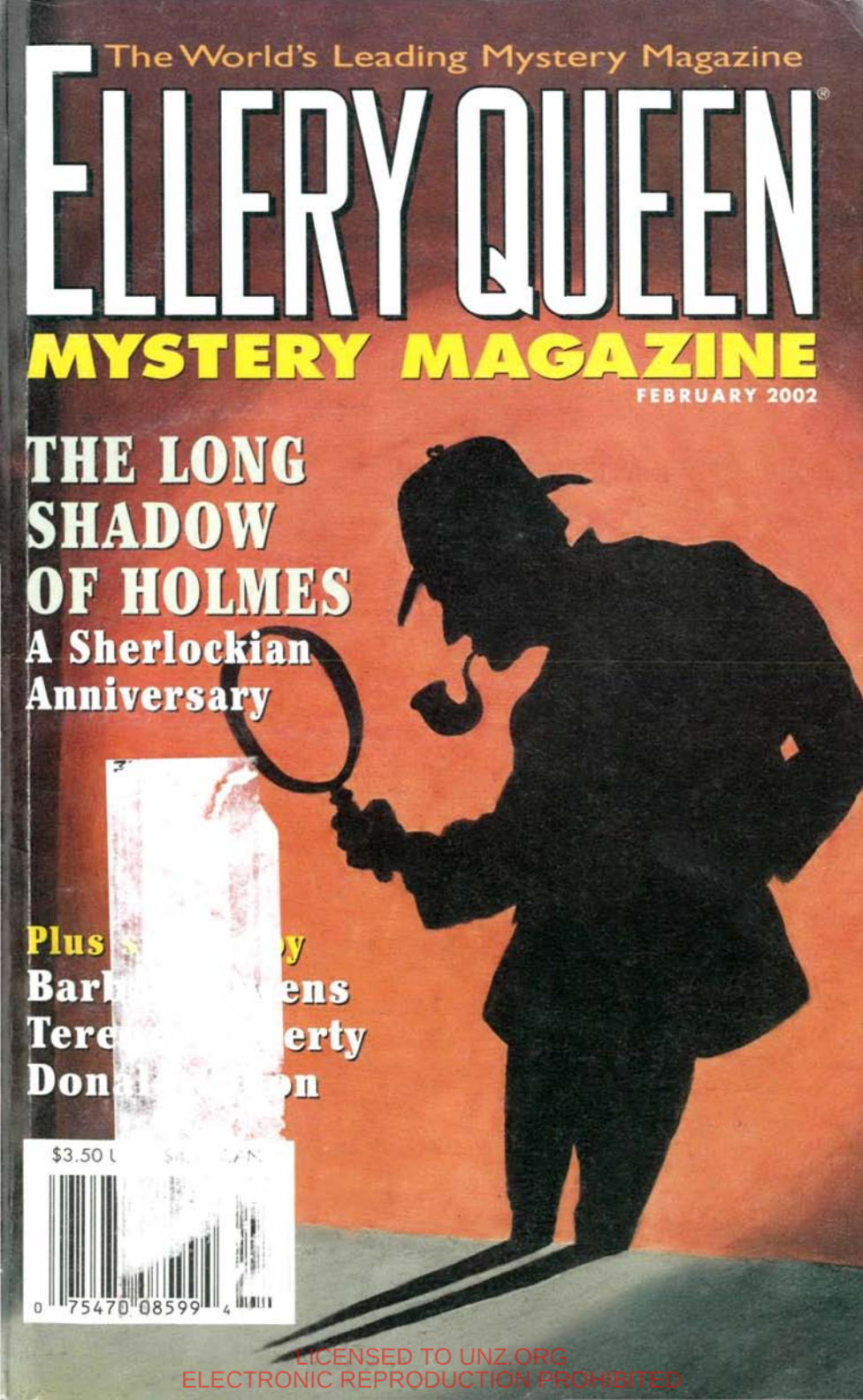

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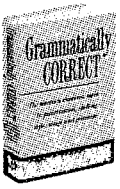

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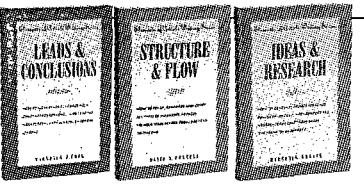

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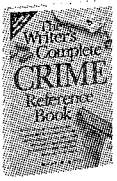

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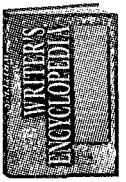

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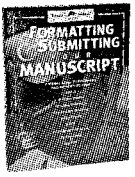

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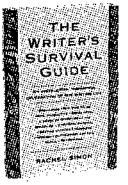

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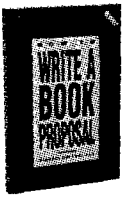

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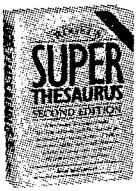

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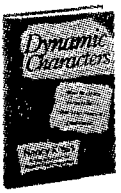

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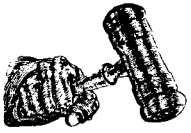

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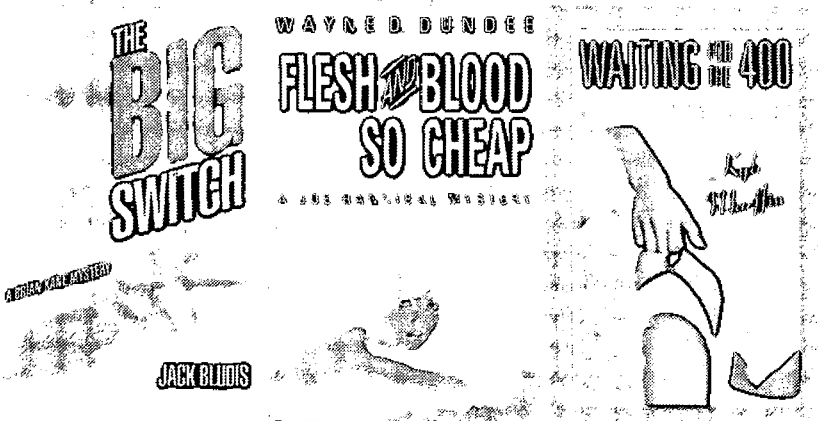

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In My House

by Barbara Owens

In my house is an upright piano given to me by my late husband on our wedding day. In my house is a flat white rock with a smooth hole worn through its middle. I found it alongside a river years ago. There is also an old chamber pot filled with pussy willow and peacock feathers—and a portrait of Elvis painted on black velvet. A dear friend gave that one to me years ago as a joke, but I decided to devil her by putting it on the wall. She complained every time she looked at it; then she moved away and I just never got around to taking it down. My house is filled with such things. My late husband used to tease that once something caught my fancy I couldn't seem to let it go. I don't care. These are my things. They belong in my house. Every one of them brings back a memory or has a story to tell.

Sometimes April comes to town like a gentle spirit. New green things start popping up everywhere as the sun shows its face and the air warms away the cold. At other times the chill lingers. Everyone stays indoors while raw winds hold on longer than any

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sensible person could want. This year we were blessed with the gentle spirit, and the first thing I did was hire the Schofield brothers to patch my roof. Bob Schofield had been after me for some time to put a new roof on my house, but I don't believe in spending money drunkenly, so I pointed out the worst spots to him and promised to think awhile longer about doing the whole thing. Ardis Buell, my friend and next-door neighbor, also a widow, came over for coffee on the second day the men were up pounding on my roof. We sat in the sunny kitchen and watched birds gathering nesting materials in my backyard.

"'In My House' was inspired by, of all things, a television commercial with a repetitive phrase, 'in my house,' that lodged in my brain, an almost full-blown story unrolling behind it," Barbara Owens told *EQMM*. This glimpse into the creative process is interesting since the Edgar Allan Poe Award-winning author, who hails from California, is noted for the originality of her short-story ideas.

"This time of year is best," she said. "I get so much energy I don't know what to do with all of it."

"Time for new things," I agreed. "I've been making lists of everything that needs doing around here."

"Don't overdo it, Ruth," she cautioned. "We're not as young as we used to be."

"Speak for yourself, Ardis," I told her. "I'm still a strong woman. But I know what I can do and what I can't. That's why Bob Schofield's up on my roof and I'm not."

On the third morning I took hot coffee and homemade cinnamon rolls out to the workers about eleven. Bob came down the ladder with a grin. "Hey, this is nice of you, Mrs. Dunning. Kilby!" he called. "Come on down here for a treat."

Bob's brother's name is Wayne. "Kilby?" I said as Bob touched ground. "You have another man with you today?"

His grin spread. "You know what that fool brother of mine did? Fell off his kid's bike last night and sprained his ankle. I've got another man to help finish up."

The person coming down the ladder looked more like a child than a man. When he reached the bottom and glanced at me I could see we were the exact same height.

"This is Kilby Johnson, Mrs. Dunning."

Kilby gave me a slight nod. He looked thin as a stick, but it was hard to tell by all the clothes he wore. He was bundled up like it was the dead of winter, two heavy sweaters and big boots, a knit

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cap pulled over his ears. All of it was old and raggedy. He was a comical sight to see.

"Good lord, you must be sweating like a pig under all that," I said to him. "Aren't you hot?"

"No, ma'am," he answered seriously. "I'm always cold. It's just my nature." His voice was soft and light, like a boy's. He didn't look a day over sixteen.

"Well, you get some of this coffee into you. I guarantee it'll fire you up."

While Bob and I discussed the progress on my roof, Kilby drifted away into my backyard. Assured that one more day's work would finish the repair, and once more promising to consider a whole new roof next spring, I started toward my kitchen door. Kilby was standing near my back fence looking intently at what I call my little orchard—a couple of apple trees, a cherry, a peach, and a persimmon that my late husband planted years ago. I strolled across to him.

"You should see what these will look like in another month or so," I said. "Blooming like heaven. They'll keep me in canned fruit and jelly for a year."

He didn't look at me, but I heard him say something about work.

"I'm sorry?"

He cleared his throat, still studying my trees. "I said they could use some work."

"What do you mean?"

I couldn't get over how small he was. Little chicken bones. Face pinched under the scruffy cap, skin pale. His small black eyes, almost beady, were always on the move, back and forth, over his shoulder and across mine, never quite looking directly at me.

"They got to be thinned out to keep getting good fruit. It takes space and light for them to do their best. Get rid of the weak stuff, you see? I could do it for you if you want."

He stopped in a rush of breath, apparently worn out from so much talking.

"You're absolutely right," I agreed. "My late husband used to do all that. He's gone now."

Kilby didn't answer. We stood shoulder to shoulder and looked at my fruit trees. "Are you sure you know what to do?" I asked finally.

He cleared his throat again. I wondered if this was always necessary to get his reluctant voice started. "I done a lot of work in orchards. All kinds, all over."

A long moment passed. Apparently his side of the conversation was finished. I crossed my yard again and called Bob Schofield down from my roof to tell him about it.

"What do you know about him? Can I trust him? Who's his family?"

Bob glanced across the yard at Kilby. "He's not from around

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here, Mrs. Dunning. He's a drifter. Riley Walker over at the Texaco station on the boulevard recommended him to me. Kilby's been working for him for several weeks, cleaning up and running errands. He's a good worker. Kind of simple, I think, and he sure is quiet, but you don't have to worry about him doing a good job for you."

I went back to Kilby, still communing with my trees, and made arrangements for him to start on them as soon as the roof was finished. Then I went back inside and sat at my kitchen table, thinking about the uncharacteristically rash thing I had just done.

I'm an early riser, always have been. As Kilby would say, it's just my nature. When I came down on the morning he was to begin work the sun had just risen over the tops of the trees. But there he was when I glanced out my kitchen window, all hunched up on the back steps, wearing all the same old clothes. For a moment his appearance made me wonder what I had gotten myself into. Then I marched across the kitchen and opened my back door.

"Well, you certainly believe in getting an early start," I greeted him.

He stood up, arms crossed, hands tucked into his armpits. He looked like he was freezing. "I just need you to show me where the tools are," he said.

I swear, it looked like a scarecrow was standing on my back steps. "I haven't had my breakfast yet," I told him. "Have you?"

He said he had but I knew he was lying. Soon he was seated uncertainly at my kitchen table and I was busy with bacon and eggs at the stove. I saw his little black eyes taking in the big comfortable room and finally, without my asking, he reached up and removed his tattered cap. His hair was light brown and silky as a baby's. It needed cutting and his clothes could certainly use a wash, but I noticed the rest of him was clean, even to his fingernails. The plate I set in front of him was heaping. He tried not to show how hungry he was, but I could tell by how fast the food disappeared that he hadn't had a decent meal in a long time.

"So what do you think of my house?" I asked as I poured his second cup of coffee. I was almost startled when he allowed a small smile to escape, showing even white teeth.

"It sure is big."

"It sure is. Not all that many rooms, though. The third floor's all attic. This house belonged to my late husband's family—goes back three generations. Takes a lot of work to keep it up, I can tell you."

He said nothing.

"Bob Schofield tells me that you're not from around here. Where do you come from?"

The dark eyes slid, fastening somewhere over my shoulder. "I been all over," he said finally. "I move around."

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"But where's your family? Where did you grow up?"

He sighed. I could see I was making him uncomfortable. "I kind of grew up on my own," was his answer.

It wasn't in me to let it rest. "You ought to be in school, you know. How old are you, sixteen?"

The dark eyes darkened even further. "Oh, no," he said. "I'm twenty-two."

Well, that surprised me so much that it shut me up, and he took advantage of the lull to stand up and tug his cap back on. "I'd better get started on those trees," he said, "if you'll show me where the tools are. Thank you for the breakfast."

I took him to the shed where my late husband's tools were, and he knew immediately what everything was and what it was for. While we were standing in the yard I saw Ardis watching us from her kitchen window, and I was scarcely back inside before she was at my door.

"That's the boy from the roof," she said before I had her coffee poured. "Are you sure you're not making a mistake?"

"What do you mean, mistake?"

"Well, look at him. He gives me the shivers. I wouldn't want him around *my* house."

Sometimes Ardis just plain irritates me. "Then don't hire him," I answered shortly. "Bob Schofield and Riley Walker vouch for him. That's good enough for me. It's just a little yard work, after all."

"Well, I'd keep my doors locked while he's around if I were you."

After she left I watched him from the window, moving as easy as a monkey in my trees. He worked fast and he was careful. He had the job done by late afternoon, and that included cleaning up after himself. When he was finished, my yard was once again as neat as a pin. He came to the back door and I paid him.

"I like the way you work, Kilby," I told him. "If you don't have anything else lined up, I could use someone to take out my storm windows. Would you be interested?"

He said he would, and the next morning he was on my back steps again when I got up. This time I didn't have to coax him in for breakfast.

While he hauled the ladder from window to window, I started a pot of vegetable soup and went upstairs to the closet where all of my late husband's clothes were stored. I didn't even ask him if he wanted lunch, I simply told him when it was ready, and after we'd eaten I took him on a quick tour of my downstairs. He didn't say much, but he took everything in. He stopped for a while before the old sepia-toned photograph in its antique silver frame that stood on a table in my living room.

"Who's he? Part of your family?" he asked politely.

I regarded the solemn gentleman in the stiff collar with pride. "I

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have no idea who he is. I got that at an antique shop. I wanted the frame for something else, but then I liked the looks of him so much that I kept him in there. Something about him—even his whiskers look stern. I've decided he must have been a schoolteacher."

When he saw the piano in the corner his eyes softened. "I knew someone once who had a piano like that. You play, Miz Dunning?"

"Not a note. And neither did my late husband."

"Your kids?"

"I don't have children, Kilby."

He looked puzzled. "But you have a piano."

"Because my late husband gave it to me. It's mine. It belongs in my house."

When the windows were finished and he knocked at the back door for payment, I handed him the bundle I had readied for him. "Here are a couple of sweaters and some shirts that belonged to my late husband. He was taller than you so his pants won't fit, but I want you to have these." His mouth opened quickly. "Now don't say no. They're not doing anyone any good just hanging in a closet. You'd be doing me a favor."

He took them, mumbling an awkward thanks, and I asked, "Do you know anything about painting?"

He blinked. "Pictures?"

"No, buildings. That old shed out back could use a couple of coats. Would you be interested?"

He said he would be. I told him I would buy the paint and he should report the following day about noon. "We'll have lunch first, then you can get started. And bring your old clothes with you. I'll wash them."

He arrived on time, of course, wearing the same old jeans and one of his new shirts. It was a warm, sunny day. For the first time, he was without his hat. He didn't bring any clothes for washing, but I never saw those tattered old sweaters again.

At my card club meeting that afternoon Ardis couldn't wait to tell our friends how foolish I was to hire such a disreputable-looking creature.

"She even feeds him," she finished with a reproachful look at me. "I wouldn't have him in my yard, let alone my house."

Some of them agreed with her, but they all went to peek at him through my kitchen window, scraping away at the old paint on my shed. Mary Ellen Woods shivered. "Well, at least he's footloose. He'll be moving on soon. But I'd be careful, Ruth. You don't know what he might do."

What he did was accept my offer of supper, and when the pork chops were just a memory I tried to get him talking about himself by talking about myself first. I told him about my late husband's insurance business, about how we vacationed once in Miami,

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Florida, and how his final painful illness went on so long that it was a blessing when he died.

"I know he was relieved, too," I finished. "He had a hard time of it, he suffered so. He was a lot like you, Kilby—didn't talk much. He always said I could talk enough for both of us. He's been gone three years now."

Kilby just looked at his plate.

"So how about you? Do you keep in touch with your family?"

He fiddled with his fork for a long time, then cleared his throat and said, "They took me away from my folks when I was nine because they beat on me. I was in foster homes for a while, first one and then another, but they beat on me, too, so I ran away when I was twelve and I been on my own ever since."

He said it quietly and matter-of-factly and that's all he would say. I went to bed that night wondering how anyone could live that way, without anything or anyone to call his own.

My shed was finished by the end of the week and he had done a fine job. I fixed him a big supper on the final day. He tucked into it with obvious pleasure.

"I like a man with an appetite," I told him. "Do you cook for yourself where you live? I'll bet you don't. Most men just get by on any old thing when there's no one to do for them."

He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "I do all right," he said.

"Where do you live, by the way?"

He cleared his throat, sighed, then cleared it again. "At the Texaco station," he mumbled.

I thought I hadn't heard right. "Where?"

"Mr. Walker's Texaco station."

"You're living in a gas station?"

He was looking more pained by the second, but he nodded. "I do some work for him and he set up a cot for me in the back. There's things to eat and drink in the machines. He lets me have them for free. It works out okay."

Potato chips, candy bars, and colas. I couldn't believe it. Something fell into place in my head with a snap.

"Well, I don't know about that," I said finally. "But thank you for the good jobs you've done for me. If you're not busy elsewhere, come back Monday morning. I might have something else for you."

I had so much to do that the weekend was over before I knew it and Kilby was on my back steps again. I brought him in and fed him breakfast. When he finished he thanked me and asked what I wanted him to do.

"I've got a proposition for you, Kilby," I said. "And I want you to think about it before you say anything. It seems to me that a Texaco station is no place for someone to live. You need a proper home and that's what I'm offering. Come live in my house. I won't

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charge you any rent. I don't need the money—besides, you can work around the place for your room and board. I'm just past sixty and I'm still a strong woman, but there are things that I can't do anymore. You can do them for me."

His eyes started to turn glassy, but I kept going.

"I also talked to my friend, Wendell Howard, who owns the hardware store where I bought the paint for the shed. He could use someone part-time, helping stock shelves and whatnot, and he said for you to come in to see him. It won't be much money, but it'll give you a little to spend. I think it sounds like a good arrangement. What do you say?"

I thought for a minute he couldn't get his jaw unlocked. His thin little face had paled to pearly white. Finally, a sound. It was very soft. "Live in your house?"

That encouraged me. At least it wasn't an instant no.

"That's right. I've been busy as a beaver all weekend getting a place ready for you."

His eyes shot towards the ceiling as if he could see through to the bedrooms above. He moistened his lips. "Miz Dunning, I can't do that. I don't—I have to—I move around, you know."

I was ready for that. "Well, you're not planning to leave today, are you? I'll bet you've never had a better offer. Besides, you might decide you like it and settle down. Just try it, that's all I'm asking. It would certainly be a favor to me."

I had him on his feet and through the basement door before he could think of anything else to say. When he saw the little room I had ready for him down there, an unintelligible sound escaped from him.

"My late husband built this. He called it his tinkering room. See? You have two windows for light. It's nice and warm. The sofa opens into a bed and I brought some shelves down where you can put your things. There are hooks to hang your clothes. I'll give you a key to the back door so you can come and go when you want to. You'll use the bathroom off the kitchen and I'll use the one upstairs. You'll be my boarder, Kilby. Now, come on, what do you say?"

I watched him shrug and look around helplessly, his eyes taking in every corner of the snug little room. Finally, he cleared his throat. "Miz Dunning, you don't even know me."

"I know enough," I assured him. "And I want you to feel free to bring your friends down here if you want. But I have to ask you not to smoke. And no drugs. I understand most young people do that these days. Do you have a drinking problem? Any of these things might make a difference."

"I don't have any friends," he answered slowly. "I stick to myself. I don't smoke and I stay away from drugs. They mess you up." He

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paused. "I do like a beer now and then," he admitted with a sigh.

"Well, so do I. You can keep it and anything else you want in the refrigerator. What's your answer?"

He had to be comparing the chilly, smelly gas station to this warm room. I could almost hear his brain working. "I guess I could try it," was his answer, the answer I had hoped for. I even got a hint of a smile for the second time since I first saw him climbing down from my roof.

He moved in the same day, carrying all he owned in a worn backpack. I had located some scatter rugs to keep his feet warm and a couple of my late husband's duck prints to hang on the wall. I liked the looks of it, even if I did say so myself.

While he was gone to the hardware store for a duplicate of my kitchen-door key and to accept the position offered, Ardis broke all speed records to get from her house to mine. She had seen him with his backpack and was absolutely appalled when she heard what I had done.

"A woman your age should have more sense," she stated flatly. "He could be a serial killer for all you know."

I eyed her ample body and assured her, "I don't think you have to worry there. You could take him if you had to. The boy's no bigger than a gnat. I'm doing him a kindness, that's all."

Her look was bleak. "Well, I just hope you won't be sorry for it."

Belatedly remembering that the room below was lit by one overhead bulb, I took Kilby up to the second floor when he returned with his own key and a job. When I showed him the pull-down steps leading to the trapdoor in the attic, he looked surprised. "I've never seen anything like that."

"You'll find the attic chock-full. As you've probably noticed, I tend to hang on to things. There's a floor lamp over in the northwest corner. It has a pink shade on it, but I guess you won't mind. Bring it down so you'll have a good light to read by."

While he scampered up the ladder it occurred to me that I may have made a mistake. Maybe he didn't know how to read and I'd insulted him. But it couldn't be helped now so I put it out of my mind. I heard him rummaging around and before long he was back at the top of the steps, the long post of the lamp handed carefully down to me. When he was standing beside me again I saw his eyes were big and round.

"Miz Dunning, you've got a coffin up in that attic," he blurted out.

I had to laugh. "Like everything else in this house, Kilby, that coffin has a story to tell. It belonged to my late husband's father. Many years ago he and a friend got into an argument as to which one would have the grandest funeral when he passed on. Well, my father-in-law was determined he would be the one, so he had that

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coffin made especially for him, and it cost a fortune, I can tell you. He stored it in the attic and never told anyone but family. By the time he finally died, years later, he had decided to be cremated, so that dusty old thing has been up there ever since."

Kilby just shook his head. "What do you think about that?" he said, and he took the lamp down to his room where it looked fine. I fixed chicken and dumplings for dinner, and our living arrangement began.

I really didn't notice too much difference. He was so quiet I could hardly tell he was there. He was very conscientious about keeping the downstairs bathroom clean, and he even offered to help me wash and dry dishes until I convinced him I'd rather do it myself. I never went down to his basement room after he settled in, not even to clean. It was his room and he had a right to his privacy, that was my opinion. He worked at the hardware store and the Texaco station, and he was always ready to do whatever I needed done around my home. Sometimes he would even do things that I hadn't noticed needed doing. I fed him breakfast and dinner every day, and gradually he began to fill out a little and stop looking so much like a scarecrow. He still wore more clothing than most people, due to his cold nature, so I took the hint and gave him another blanket for his bed. He spoke so little that he wasn't especially good company, but I reasoned that would change once we got to know each other better.

He didn't want to talk about his background, even though I kept trying. At first I invited him to watch television with me in the evenings. He didn't seem comfortable with that, though, so one day I bought a small portable TV and gave it to him for his room. After that I could sometimes hear it when I listened at the basement door, so he must have enjoyed it. I never heard him laugh out loud except when reruns of the show about the *Tool Time* man were on. He really seemed to like that one. And I noticed him bringing home magazines to take to his room, so he obviously could read. Little by little, it seemed to me, we were getting more comfortable with one another.

And then one day he scared me. I came up behind him hunched over on my back steps and he whipped around quick as a cat. He had a knife in his hand that was so sharp the sun danced off it and put spots in my eyes. My heart bounced right up into my neck, but then he straightened up and his face smoothed out. He had been whittling something, I saw, so I took a big breath and said, "I didn't mean to startle you, Kilby. I'm sorry."

"I didn't hear you coming," he said.

I should have known better, I told myself. Living the way he was used to, he had to be constantly on his guard. I sat down beside him.

"I guess you don't trust people very much."

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He put the knife in his pants pocket and looked at his knees. "Most of the time I don't."

"You can trust me." He didn't answer. "And I trust you. We can be friends if you want to." Still no answer. I decided to prove that I trusted him. "That knife looks really sharp. It reminds me that my kitchen knives could use some sharpening. Would you mind doing that for me? And the garden tools, too. . . . Won't be long before I'll be needing them."

Not fifteen minutes after he started, spreading them out on a blanket in the backyard, Ardis was at my kitchen door, glancing fearfully over her shoulder.

"Now he's out there surrounded by knives," she declared as she sank into a chair. "Whatever *are* you thinking?"

"I asked him to do it," I answered calmly. "You'd better get used to it, Ardis. Kilby is here to stay."

When she left and I went out to see how my knives were doing, Kilby said with a shadow in his voice, "Miz Buell doesn't like me."

"Pay no attention. That's just Ardis. I came to see what you want for supper."

When I came down to fix breakfast two mornings later he was waiting for me in the kitchen. Wordlessly, he held out his hand. A bird's nest containing a small blue carved bird lay there. The bird was crudely done, its knobby head sitting cockeyed on its body, the eyes as black and beady as Kilby's own. I took it from him.

"Is this what you were carving the other day?"

He nodded. "The nest fell out of a tree. I used some paint I found in the shed. Is that okay?"

"Of course it's okay. Kilby, this bird looks almost lifelike. I'd better spray the nest, though. No telling what little pests are living in it."

He ducked his head shyly. "I already did that."

"Well, thank you very much. I have the perfect spot for it." I set it in my sunny kitchen window. "It'll make me smile every morning when I come downstairs. Nothing like a good smile to start the day."

Gradually we settled into a certain routine. When he was home I fed him and told him about my day. Sometimes he would tell me a thing or two about his, little things, and once in a while he would answer questions about his life before he arrived on my roof.

He said he had once known a man with a three-legged dog that could run like the wind; another time he told me about an abandoned treehouse he had discovered and lived in for one whole summer. I asked him if he'd ever had a girlfriend and he said a few. He met one girl he really liked, but he moved on before it got serious. I drank up everything he told me. I had never known anyone like him. He had been to so many places, touched so many lives, yet no connections had been made. I wondered if those people even remembered him after he was gone.

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Mostly, though, I did the talking and he listened. I showed him some of the things in my house and told him their stories. He seemed to enjoy that. He especially liked the story about the Elvis painting, showing one of his rare smiles. One day I sent him back up to the attic for a little rocking chair I had there. I thought it would give him a comfortable place to sit and watch TV or read.

My little orchard outdid itself when bloom time came. I told Kilby the trees were thanking him for thinning them so well.

When the ground was ready he spaded up my garden and we planted it together. I asked him if he had any special favorites, and after much thought he said he guessed green onions and tomatoes, so we put in an extra row of those. It was very pleasant, the two of us working together, taking breaks for a can of beer in the new spring sun.

Ardis still came over for coffee most mornings, trying to avoid the times when Kilby was home. One morning she sat down at the kitchen table and said abruptly, "I feel I should tell you that some of the neighbors have asked me if you have a boyfriend living here."

It surprised me so much that I laughed in her face. "Why, Ardis Buell, only a fool would think such a thing."

She turned red but insisted stubbornly, "It's not right, Ruth. It doesn't look good."

"I don't care, do you hear me? Kilby's a boarder, that's all. You tell the neighbors to mind their own business."

Spring turned into summer and Kilby finally began to shed his clothes. Before long he was working in a T-shirt. His arms were thin but strong, and I've never seen a better worker. It was a pleasure just to sit and look at my yard. It had never been so fine, pruned and shaped and fertilized until it resembled a picture in a magazine. Kilby never allowed a weed to show its ugly head for long. I wondered how someone so small could have survived the life he'd lived. He had to be tough inside, where it counted. I admired him for it and took a certain pride in knowing that I was helping him along. We made quite a team, I thought.

His baby-fine hair was getting too long for my taste, so one day I suggested the barber my late husband had used and offered to drive him there. He had told me he could drive but he didn't have a license. I wanted no trouble with the law, so he reluctantly accepted my offer. He looked much better when he came out.

Now that he had his two little jobs he was accumulating some spending money. I dropped a few hints and one day he came home with two new pairs of jeans. He wouldn't part with his big boots, though, no matter how many hints I dropped.

I kept trying to persuade him to get out and make new friends, maybe find a girl he liked, but I got nowhere there. He was a solitary man, it seemed, and I would have to accept it. When he

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wasn't at work or helping me around the place, he spent his time in his room. It had gotten to feel quite natural for me to know he was down there.

I had gotten him upstairs a few times to play cards with me, but he wasn't very good at it. I think he did it just to please me, so I finally stopped pestering him and he went back downstairs.

Then my garden started to produce. Kilby brought my jars up from the basement and I commenced canning. It was hot work, standing over steaming pots on the stove in the middle of summer, but I knew it would be worth it.

"Just think how good all these home-grown things will taste come January," I told him.

September was sultry and lazy. October started the same, then one morning I woke up to air that was crisp with a hint of frost. I went out into my backyard just to enjoy the smell of it. Fall leaves were beginning to droop, preparing to give up the ghost. Kilby went to work at the hardware store in a sweater and I brought out a couple of jugs of cider I'd made from my early apples. I began to think lovingly of cold winter evenings in my big warm house. Every season has its blessings, I've always said that.

I woke earlier than usual the following day and went downstairs quietly so I wouldn't wake Kilby. Then I discovered I was out of blueberry syrup. Kilby liked blueberry syrup on his pancakes, so I threw on a sweater and drove to the all-night market to get some. When I walked back into my kitchen he was standing at the basement door, wearing two sweaters I had given him, his old backpack on his back. He was so surprised to see me that he spoke first.

"I didn't—I thought you hadn't come down yet," he stammered.

I wasn't sure what I was seeing. "Where are you going with that thing?" I asked, indicating the pack.

Kilby shifted from foot to foot. "I wrote you a note," he said, and thrust a sheet of paper at me.

I took it from him, still not understanding. In sprawled, childish letters it read: I'M GOING ON. THIS IS A NICE PLACE. THE BEST I EVER HAD. KILBY JOHNSON. P.S. BE SURE TO HAVE SOMEONE KEEP YOUR FRUIT TREES CLEARED OUT.

A cold empty place opened up inside me. "You're leaving?"

He nodded.

My voice sounded very far away to my own ears. "Just like that? Why?"

He cleared his throat and shrugged. "It's time."

"What about Wendell Howard? And Mr. Walker at the Texaco? It's not very nice to leave them in the lurch like this."

"I told them yesterday. They said it was okay. Mr. Walker gave me twenty dollars to start me out."

I simply couldn't believe it. "This is the silliest thing I've ever

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heard, Kilby. You have a place to live here, a job—two jobs! And just where do you think you're going?"

He looked helplessly at me. "Someplace warm."

My mind was running around in circles. "What do I have to do to persuade you to stay? I thought we liked each other. I thought we were friends."

His eyes looked hungry. He wanted to be elsewhere. "I got to move on. It's time," he repeated softly.

My brain caught on something and slowed down. "Will you stay one more day? One day can't matter. I need you to put in my storm windows. You know I can't do that. Stay until tomorrow, all right? I'll fix you a nice supper tonight, chicken and dumplings." Chicken and dumplings was his favorite meal.

He reluctantly agreed. He left his pack sitting just inside the basement door, a firm reminder, while he went out to the shed for the storm windows. Feeling dizzy, I went upstairs and sat on the side of my bed to think. I thought for a very long time, long after I heard him begin to set the windows into place.

I couldn't believe what was happening. I had made a home for him, done everything I could think of to make it comfortable and inviting. A part of me kept questioning why I was so upset that he was leaving for no reason, and finally the answer came. I had become attached to Kilby Johnson. I didn't want him sitting at someone else's kitchen table. I wanted him sitting at mine. Then everything else was clear.

When Ardis arrived for coffee I was my usual self, setting out the makings for the supper I planned. Later, when she had gone and Kilby was still occupied outside, I went into my late husband's closet and pulled out the big bag of medications I had stored there after he was gone. Barbiturates, painkillers, sedatives—he had required such large amounts near the end. No such thing as too many, I reasoned, and ground them up carefully, put them in a plastic bag, and took them downstairs.

Night was coming earlier now. It was almost dark when we sat down to eat. While Kilby ate his way through a heaping plateful, I told him the story about the cigar store Indian standing in my entry hall, and he nodded as he listened. After he finished a big slab of chocolate cream pie I told him I had something special for him.

"Hot apple cider. Made with all kinds of spices. The perfect thing for a chilly night. You wait—it'll warm you all the way down to your toes."

I had already emptied the crushed capsules into a large mug. Now I filled it with warmed cider from a pan on the stove and stirred it carefully.

"Don't sip it, drink it fast," I told him. "That's the way it's best." I could only hope I had spiced it enough to hide the medicinal taste.

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Nothing more was said. He drank it as directed, and within a few short minutes his eyes fluttered closed and his head sagged down to his chest. When he began to slide from his chair I went to him, gripped him under the arms, and dragged him to the living room, where I laid him on the sofa. I sat with him there, long into the night, until he finally stopped breathing. Then I wrapped him in a nice wool blanket so he would be warm. Once I had him positioned correctly over my shoulder he wasn't very heavy at all. I'm still a strong woman, don't let anyone tell you I'm not.

I was sitting at my kitchen table, smoothing his note, when Ardis came for coffee the following morning. I handed it to her. "I found this on the table when I came down this morning," I said. "He must have left during the night."

I'll say this for Ardis—she may be aggravating at times, but she's my friend, and just then she was a very good friend indeed. After she read it she reached across to pat my hand.

"It's for the best, Ruth," she said. "You must have known this might happen. He's just a drifter, after all."

I nodded sadly. "But wouldn't you think he'd at least have the decency to say goodbye to my face?"

In my house is an upright piano that was given to me by my late husband on our wedding day. In my house is a pretty little candy dish made from abalone shell. There is also a cockeyed wooden bluebird in its nest—and a dusty old coffin, no longer empty. My things. Every one of them brings back a memory or has a story to tell. ●

The BSI dinner and the Baskerville Bash!

For a number of years, *EQMM* has paid tribute in its February issue to the Baker Street Irregulars, the world's oldest Sherlockian organization. The BSI's annual dinner celebrating the Twelfth Night birthday of Sherlock Holmes (now 148 and retired in Sussex, they claim), sports a copy of *EQMM* at every plate, and *EQMM* makes sure to include some art, fiction, poetry, or cartoons appropriate to the occasion. This year, we have extended the courtesy to the "Baskerville Bash" as well, since they, too, will meet to celebrate the birth of the immortal Holmes. The Baskerville Bash began as a dinner for the Adventuresses of Sherlock Holmes, who were excluded from the BSI dinner, which up to 1992 was limited to men. By the time the BSI opened its membership to women, the ASH had formed a tradition of its own, which lives on today in the Baskerville Bash. *EQMM* wishes to salute both organizations for their contagious enthusiasm for so important a part of our genre.

It is worth mentioning that 2002 is the 100th anniversary of the publication of one of the most famous of all the Sherlock Holmes cases, *The Hound of the Baskervilles.* The fearsome beast appears in this issue in cartoon and verse, for Watson's account of its fate notwithstanding, it, too, has achieved a kind of immortality.

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Give or Take a Summer or Two

by Peter Turnbull

Thursday 10:00–14:00 hours

Richard King drove towards the crowd. As a crowd it was on the small side, a group more than a crowd. About fifteen people, mostly adults, a couple of excited children who should, King found time to ponder, be in school. This was April, midweek. Term time. The two youngsters, clearly of school age, clearly healthy, were "doggin'." The crowd, or group, was held back by a blue and white police tape. Cars on the road slowed as they approached the scene and then, seeing nothing obvious, nothing to ogle at, picked up speed and drove on. The crowd seemed to King, as he approached, to be staring with some horrific fascination at a concrete blockhouse no larger than a domestic garage adjoining any house in any suburb. It had often taken King with despair, in turn with amazement, in turn with amusement, what items of sheer nothingness a crowd can find to stare at. A concrete blockhouse, half a century old, standing at the corner of the playing fields near the entrance, surrounded by the housing of Clydebank and a mixture of public housing and privately owned dwellings. The building had been there as long as King could remember. In fact, it was twice as old as he was.

King parked his aged Ford behind an area car which stood parked at the kerb with its twin lights silently flashing. And that, thought King, probably explained the crowd, for nothing draws people like blue flashing lights. And if the people were not drawn

"Set in Yorkshire, this well-crafted whodunit is a must for police procedural fans and Anglophiles alike," said *PW* of Peter Turnbull's latest novel *Perils and Dangers* (Severn House/2001). His new story for us is an entry in an earlier series set in Glasgow and following the cops of P Division. In both series readers get a hefty slice of daily life in the locale along with the mystery. ¶

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to the locus, then they stood in their gardens or leaned on the balconies of their high-rise apartment block, as in this case King saw was happening as he glanced to his left at the housing near the entrance to the playing fields. Above him was a blue, near cloudless sky and he was comfortable in a sports jacket: not bad for April in the West of Scotland. He walked past the mortuary van in which the driver and mate were sitting irreverently reading tabloid newspapers and smoking cigarettes. Walking on, King recognised Dr. Chan's car, parked in front of the mortuary van, and noted again how strangely untidy it was, like a travelling refuse tip. Strange for a man of Asian extraction, which people King had always found to be neat-living and given to a functional and intelligent use of space. It was especially strange for an Asian doctor, who valued, King presumed, hygiene. But that was Dr. Chan. King elbowed his way through the crowd with a polite but authoritative "Excuse me, excuse me," lifted the tape, and walked towards the blockhouse. Sergeant Piper welcomed him. "Sir," he nodded.

"Hi." Richard King smiled. He liked Piper, finding him a confident, efficient cop. "What have we got? Apart from all the spectators, I mean."

"It's a corpse, sir. Dr. Chan's in there now."

"In there?" King looked at the blockhouse.

"Yes, sir. It's apparently an air-raid shelter, concrete, as you see, dates from nineteen thirty-nine. Dark is not the word to describe the inside. The entrance turns immediately to the left, a sharp ninety-degree turn so that shrapnel can't get in, but because of that, neither can light. It was designed to withstand everything except a direct hit. Folk who lived hereabouts used to make for this shelter and others like it if they were caught in the open when the bombs were falling. Those in their homes would make for the Anderson shelters at the bottom of their garden."

"Yes, I'm familiar with them. My great aunt has one. It's used as the garden shed now. Gets a lick of paint each year."

"Well, what happened here is that a young lad was given a flashlight for his birthday and was impatient to use it. He couldn't wait until nightfall and so he came here for a peek inside the shelter. He's been sedated."

"Sedated?"

"Ran home, panted to his mum about what he'd seen. Mum phoned three nines and returned to the front room and found her son trembling uncontrollably. So she phoned three nines again and said son was taken to hospital suffering from shock. And we are here."

"And we are here, as you say." King looked beyond Piper and saw Dr. Chan emerge from the shelter. Seeing and recognising King, he approached him.

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"Well," Dr. Chan smiled. "I can pronounce him life extinct. A formality in this case."

"Oh?"

"Oh yes, DC King. He's deceased."

"Time of death? Would you venture an opinion, sir?"

"Oh, I wouldn't. Not an exact time. Neither would I opine about the cause. But it's a male corpse. Adult male."

"Roughly how long has he been dead?"

"Oh, about twenty years, I'd say, give or take a summer or two."

The corpse was swabbed with industrial disinfectant. It was laid on the stainless-steel table on its back, with arms and legs protruding upwards. Tatters of rotting material still clung to the decaying flesh and were washed away with the disinfectant.

"I'm surprised it's not totally skeletal," King said, for want of something to say. He also noted, incidentally, but with some pleasure, that, for once, the gleam in the eye of the mortuary assistant appeared to be absent. This corpse clearly had little appeal for him.

"It was the damp," the pathologist, Reynolds, replied, snapping on latex gloves. "It's in dry and arid conditions that corpses become skeletons, as in deserts. Even in a jungle a corpse will become subsumed into the soil rather than be stripped of its flesh, unless a column of driver ants happens to pass by. Damp will preserve rather than destroy flesh. In fact, as an extreme example, we have had a number of bodies recovered from peat bogs in Western Europe which have been so well preserved that their discovery has prompted the local police force to start a murder investigation. Then it turns out that the corpse is two thousand years old or so."

"Yes, I've read of such instances."

"The cold, too, has hindered the decomposition. In winter the temperature in that shelter would have been below freezing for weeks on end. In the summer, it would be only a few degrees above freezing, and there was little or no sunlight, so flies wouldn't lay their eggs there. The whole place was black with damp, so his flesh turned to mush but didn't decay. What we have here is a state of extreme adipocere: the body is greasy, soaplike in texture, but the features are just discernible and the internal organs will be in good shape. What would you say, thin-faced man, mid sixties when he died? I recall a similar case, a body discovered after being entombed in a damp house. What had happened in that case was that during the First World War, the Kaiser war, not the Hitler war, a soldier on leave decided, we assumed, to burgle the house in question by climbing down a chimney and to exit the house by a door or window. He got to the bottom and found that the fireplace had been bricked up."

"Good heavens."

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"Terrible death. He must have gone by starvation in the end. Nobody knows if he yelled or hammered on the bricks, or if he did whether he was heard or not, because it wasn't until the days of cheap flights across the Atlantic before the then owner of the house decided to unbrick the fireplace. Anyway, it was a damp house with little light penetrating down the chimney and, as in this case, adipocere was well established. Features recognisable as a young man, had a few campaign medals on his chest, uniform all but rotted, no way to ID him. He was given a name and buried. Now answer me a question if you can. How is it that our man here could have remained undiscovered for twenty years? The locus was an air-raid shelter on the corner of a playing field, surrounded by high-density housing."

"Simply that no one went in there, sir. It's dark, very dark inside, put folk off, and being a building that they see every day and that those born in the post-war era grew up with, it held no intrigue for them. It had no appeal, no attraction. So no one went in."

"I can see that. Yes, that would explain it. Careless way to dump a body, though, if he was dumped. He could easily have stumbled in there on a winter's night with a stomach full of cheap wine and not woken up." The tall, silver-haired pathologist surveyed the body. "I can detect no outward sign of skeletal damage, no protruding ribs, for example. He wasn't set upon in the street and given a good kicking, he's not a victim of a hit-and-run who picked himself up after an accident and stumbled into the shelter in a state of shock, which has been known to happen."

"Indeed it has, sir."

"Hello . . . ?" Reynolds peered at the skull. He parted the scalp hair at the side of the head. "Well now, that's as fair an example of a fractured skull as I've seen in a long time. The sort of injury you'd expect to be sustained if your head had stopped a pick-axe handle."

"Murder?"

"Murder. This now makes it something that you'd have to become interested in, methinks."

"Certainly does, sir." King nodded. He was a chubby, bearded cop. "It makes it a code four-one in police speak."

"That's murder, I assume?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I don't know what sort of priority you'll be able to give this. The important first week of any murder investigation is long past and it may be that the perpetrator himself is also in a better place. Dr. Chan's twenty-year estimate could be as wide as ten years out either way. I'd say that you're looking at a time window of ten to thirty years ago in this case."

"That he remained undetected for thirty years hardly seems credible."

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"Well, you've already given the reason for that, Mr. King. But it's still less harrowing than the Kaiser war soldier starving to death behind a bricked-up fireplace. At least our friend here didn't know his future. Or so we assume. I think the best thing I can do is try to help determine his ID. I can only do that by having a look at his teeth. A real gold mine of information is the mouth. You can tell a person's appearance, ethnic group, state of health, and wealth."

"Wealth?"

"Wealth. Yes, wealth. All from his teeth." Reynolds took a stainless-steel rod from the instrument trolley and forced it between the gums of the deceased and levered it up and down until the jaws gave with a crack which echoed around the pathology laboratory. King flinched. "Don't worry." Reynolds grinned as he replaced the metal rod. "He can't feel anything, he's got the best anaesthetic known to man."

King smiled as he watched the lower jaw fall slackly away. He enjoyed Reynolds's sense of humour.

"Ah-ha. Now that is interesting."

"Sir?"

"Yes, indeed. Very interesting indeed. Some very nice dental work and a gold crown. This is what I meant about teeth indicating wealth or otherwise. This man kept on top of his teeth, and could afford gold cappings. This was no down-and-out who crossed the path of a thug who was looking for a victim. He was a man of means who looked after his health. A man with something to live for. A man whose absence would have been noticed."

"There'll be a miss-per file on him?"

"I'd assume so. I'll send the lower jaw to the School of Dentistry. If you can draw up a shortlist of names, they'll compare the records of the names with these teeth. A man of means in his sixties reported missing, probably from the city of Glasgow, from ten to thirty years ago. I'll cut a tooth in cross section which will give his age to plus or minus one year."

"If you'd do that, sir."

Monday 09:15–09:45 hours

Fabian Donoghue relaxed in his chair and pulled gently, lovingly, on his pipe. He listened attentively to Richard King's feedback, concentrating hard but not interrupting, giving little, perhaps an occasional nod of his head, enough to let King know that he was listening. He liked King, approved of him. He saw King as being well in the frame for promotion; he was, Donoghue knew, a man who would go far in the police force. When King had finished, Donoghue smiled, glanced sideways along the length of Sauchiehall Street—angular, concrete buildings, a thoroughfare of traffic and pedestrians reaching to the brow of the hill and Queen

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Street Station and the concert hall. "Yes, well done, Richard." He turned again to King. "Rapid ID helps a lot."

"Computer age, sir. Really, it was Dr. Reynolds cutting a tooth in half, which enabled him to pinpoint the age of the deceased at the time of death as fifty-nine, plus or minus one year. Then it was a trawl through the miss pers of the last thirty years for a missing male of that age. There were not many of them. Sixty-year-old men do not go missing and remain missing very often, they just don't."

"I think you're right, there's no hard and fast rule, there's no accounting for human behaviour, but most miss pers are youthful, children or young adults. As you say, sixty-year-olds do not go missing with the same frequency."

"In the end, we could whittle the list down to just three names."

"How did it feel looking at police records which were in existence before you were born?"

"Interesting, sir." King smiled. "Life went on before I was born and it will go on when I die."

"We have a short span whichever way you look at it. The important thing is how we use it, the important thing is what we leave behind us."

"Indeed, sir. We don't have to live long to do well. As Martin Luther King said, a short life is not necessarily a bad thing."

"So, who was he?"

"Fella called Oslen . . . Rory Oslen. He was reported missing by his wife about twenty-five years ago. I was in the world then, just. Not walking, though."

"I was a schoolboy. So what does the file tell us?"

"This is the file, sir." King patted a brown file of thick cardboard. "They looked like this twenty-five years ago."

"Yes, I've come across them."

"Well, he was a businessman, quite wealthy, lived in Balfron—large house, cars, yacht on the Clyde. He had no particular line of business. He seemed to find good ideas, innovations that had been patented and then arrange for them to be manufactured and marketed. He had a 'kingpin' place in the scheme, few overheads, worked from home, contracted out all the work and took his percentage. Nice house, by the photograph, as you see." King handed Donoghue a photograph.

"Nice." Donoghue took his pipe from his mouth. "A very, very nice pile of bricks. Handsome gardens, too. So what have we, if anything, to go on?"

"Interesting age difference between them, could be significant. She was all of twenty-five when she reported him missing."

"Some age difference."

"Thirty-five years. I've heard that some women do seek father figures in marriage, but that's an extreme age gap, as you say, sir."

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"Children?"

"He had one by a previous marriage, none by his wife who reported him missing."

"Enemies?"

"None indicated, but what businessman doesn't have enemies? Now the one thing we do have is this watch." King handed Donoghue a ladies' watch sealed in a cellophane wrapper. "As you see, it's a ladies' watch, very distinguished, yellow face, heart-shaped. It was found in the hand of the corpse."

"As if it had come off in a struggle?"

"That would be my thinking, sir."

"So what do you think we should do?"

"Only one thing to do, sir. Go and have a wee chat with Mrs. Oslen, who, if she is still on this planet, will be fifty years old. Tell her that her husband has been found, and in what circumstances. . . . Show her the watch, see what she can tell us."

"You'll be following that up, Richard?"

"Yes, sir. I'd like somebody with me. Malcolm Montgomerie's shift coincides with mine this month but he's up to his oxters today . . . the armed robbery."

"Ah yes."

"Perhaps we could send a constable up to see her. If she is still at this address, that is—just out of courtesy, to break the news."

"I wouldn't agree. Ordinarily I would agree, but this is a murder inquiry. If she had anything to do with her husband's murder, we don't want to tip her off, give her time to think up an alibi, even flee the country. You see my line of thinking?"

"Yes, sir."

"She may be utterly innocent, but as eighty percent of murders are committed by people who are closely known to the victim, then I'm afraid we have to put Mrs. Oslen on the list of suspects."

"Fully understand, sir."

"What you could do is check the voters' roll and see who is resident at that address at present."

King did so. The occupier of the house in question was a Mrs. Muriel Whitney. King consulted the file on Rory Oslen and found that his wife's name was Muriel, Muriel Oslen.

Tuesday 10:00–11:00 hours

The day had dawned bright, clear, with a cloudless blue sky, but with a biting wind which tugged the crimson blossoms from the flowering cherries and the magnolias. King and Montgomerie drove to Balfron. The house of Whitney lived up to its photograph. A man, King thought, would have to be wealthy indeed to sneer at a property such as this. Solid, stone-built, four-square, confident, about five or six acres of garden, landscaped, of course, with sta-

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bling off to the left. It also had the appearance that money was lavished on its upkeep.

The door of the house was painted with glossy black paint, no bell or buzzer here—too cheap, too tacky—just a large metal knocker. Montgomerie strode up to it and rapped it hard. Twice. Authoritatively. It was opened eventually by a young man, clean-shaven, conventionally good-looking, muscular beneath a tight-fitting T-shirt and chopped-off jeans which revealed bronzed legs that stopped in a pair of white trainers. "Yes?" he said.

"Police." Montgomerie showed his ID. He was tall, dark, down-turned moustache.

"Oh?"

"We are trying to trace a Mrs. Oslen. She used to live here. . . . The voters' roll now shows a Whitney living here, a Mrs. Muriel Whitney. Mrs. Oslen was Mrs. Muriel Oslen, either a coincidence or it's the same lady who has remarried."

"She remarried."

"May we speak with her?"

The man ran his fingers through his close-cropped black hair and said, "Yes, yes . . . please step inside, I'll tell her you're here."

The cops were shown into a drawing room, panelled wall, brown carpet, heavy and old-looking furniture, settee and chairs covered in purple cloth. It worked well, King thought. A clock on the wall ticked softly.

Minutes elapsed, about ten of them, guessed Montgomerie. He assumed the lady of the house was making herself presentable, or making them wait. Or both.

The door opened with a loud click. Mrs. Whitney stood in the door frame, imperiously eyeing the police officers. Haughty, King pondered, was just not the word. "Mrs. Whitney?" he asked.

"That is I."

"DC King. This is DC Montgomerie. You were married to Mr. Oslen, gentleman reported missing some years ago?"

"I was." She entered the room, slender, thin legs in high heels, black dress. She sat on the settee in a sliding, gliding, curling manner. "Please be seated, gentlemen."

The cops sat.

"Mrs. Whitney," King spoke, "we have some news of your first husband."

"Rory?"

"Yes, I'm afraid that his body has been found."

"Oh!" She seemed to the cops to be genuinely startled.

"Mrs. Whitney, can we ask you if you know whether or not your husband had any enemies?"

"Enemies? No . . . why?"

"Mr. Oslen was murdered. His body was concealed in an old air-

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raid shelter. By a quirk of fate it has remained undiscovered for twenty-five years."

"An air-raid shelter? Where?"

"Clydebank."

"Clyde . . . how did he die?"

"Of a fractured skull."

"Oh my . . ." Mrs. Whitney paled.

"Was your relationship with Mr. Oslen successful?"

"Successful?"

"Harmonious."

"Is that relevant?"

"Yes. Yes, it is relevant, Mrs. Whitney. This has become a murder inquiry. Twenty-five years after the event, but a murder inquiry nonetheless. And in a murder inquiry everything is relevant."

"It's a matter we have to eliminate," offered Montgomerie.

"Eliminate?"

"It's a new concept of police thinking. In the old days we used to look for a suspect and then find evidence to link him with the crime. Now we eliminate who we can and see who we're left with."

"And if you can't eliminate someone?"

"We become suspicious of them," said King.

"Very suspicious," said Montgomerie.

"So please tell us about the relationship between you and your husband."

"We had an understanding."

"What does that mean?"

"We had . . . it wasn't exactly passion, it wasn't Romeo and Juliet, but it wasn't the final days of Berlin, either, if you see what I mean."

"We don't."

"We lived together, it was a working relationship, but the emotion was shot long ago. The age gap didn't help. It worked, it was a calm household."

"Separate bedrooms?"

"Yes, if you must know. That's probably what kept the peace."

"So you reported your husband as a missing person?"

"I did. The police searched the house and garden as if I was under some suspicion."

"You probably were. People who disappear are usually murdered. As in this case. People who are murdered are usually murdered by someone close to them."

"Is that right?" Behind the woman, the window offered a view of the Scotland of romantic fiction and chocolate-box covers. It was a Scotland that was a long way from damp air-raid shelters in Clydebank.

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"Yes, it is right. Tell me, Mrs. Whitney, did you benefit at all from your husband's death?"

"I see, I'm under suspicion again, am I?"

"Just answer the question."

"Well, I dare say I did. I dare say I did. I inherited this house, and all the money he had in the bank."

"You were well provided for?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"A lot. Enough. But I had to wait for it."

Poor you, King thought, but remained silent.

"I had to wait for two years. It took two years for him to be presumed deceased in the eyes of the law. After two years had elapsed, I could inherit his estate."

"You married again?"

"Yes. I was still a young woman, remember."

"The man who let us in, is that your husband?"

"No." Mrs. Whitney smiled. "No, that's Adrian."

"Adrian?"

"He's the chauffeur, the gardener, the chef, and a few other things as well. It's very pleasant having a younger man in your life."

"I see. What happened to Mr. Whitney?"

"He left me."

"He walked out on you?"

"I think he went off with another woman. He traded me in for a younger model." She shrugged. "But now I've got a younger model of my own. So I can't complain."

"Mrs. Whitney." King leaned to one side and took the cellophane package from his pocket and handed it to her. "Would you look at this watch and tell me if you recognise it?" He handed it to her. She did. The slight gasp of breath, the slight shudder that ran down her body and made her hands quiver, the dilating pupils, but she said, "No, I don't. Should I?" She handed it back.

"It's not really a question of whether you should or shouldn't." King took the watch back and returned to his chair. "But it would be interesting if you did."

"Why?"

"It was found on your husband's body, in his hand," said Montgomerie.

"As if it was torn from the wrist of whoever it was that attacked him," added King.

"It ties the owner of the watch to the crime," Montgomerie offered.

"So, if we can identify the owner of the watch, we can identify your husband's murderer."

"I see." Mrs. Whitney paled and sank back onto the settee.

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"And it's clearly a woman's watch. But you don't recognise it?"

But Mrs. Whitney didn't respond. She gazed around the room, but didn't seem to be absorbing anything; it was as if her world was closing in on her.

"Mr. Oslen had a son, didn't he?"

"What? . . . Yes . . . he was married previously, I met him when he was a widower. Liam was ten then."

"Where is he now?"

"Liam? I have no idea."

"He was ten when you married Mr. Oslen?"

"Yes."

"You were married for how long before Mr. Oslen disappeared?"

"Three years."

"So by then Liam was thirteen?"

"Yes. He continued to live here with me until he was sixteen, when he was free to go, and I haven't heard from him for . . . twenty . . ."

"Twenty-two years." King helped her do her mental arithmetic. "So if he's still with us, he'll be thirty-eight years old now."

"Dare say he will be," she replied, but her mind was clearly elsewhere.

King stood. Montgomerie followed his lead. "Thank you for your time, Mrs. Whitney."

"Is that it?"

"For now."

"For now?"

"We'll be back, doubtless, always loose ends to clear up. . . . You are the next of kin of a murder victim, after all."

Driving back to Glasgow, King said, "That one is guilty."

Montgomerie, at the wheel, kept his eyes on the road; in the far distance he saw the jagged skyline of Scotland's premier city and said, "But as always, all we need to do is prove it."

Wednesday 11:30–12:00 hours

"Is that how you found me, then, aye?" Liam Oslen revealed himself to be pale, emaciated, straggly-haired, a scheme dweller, living on welfare and tins of Irish stew. He was dressed in faded, thin, tattered denim. He held a very thin hand-rolled cigarette. "I thought it was more trouble when you chapped my door. I can tell the polis knock. I've been lifted that often."

"Aye." King nodded. "That's how we found you. Didn't know where to start looking so we fed your name into the computer just to see if we knew you. And lo and behold, but nothing serious, and nothing for a good wee while."

"Aye, I've screwed the bobbin. See how I've come down in the world? You've seen my dad's house, you say?"

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"Aye."

"And here's me in a housing scheme. Aye, well, so you've found my father—well, his body?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's a mystery solved. Mind, I knew he was dead. My dad wouldn't desert me, and if it had been an accident that did for him then his body would have been found. If it wasn't found it meant it had been hidden, and that meant murder. That was my reasoning." Oslen sat on a plastic-covered settee.

"It seems your reasoning might have been correct."

"So I stopped getting into bother. Take a seat, gents. I've two wee girls to care about, that's their photo on the fireplace. Laura and Sadie are nine and eleven. They're at school at the moment, their mum's working. I'm out of work. I'm a house husband. I've come a fair way down in the world from that house in Balfron to a three-bedroom apartment in Drumchapel."

"You left when you were sixteen?" King and Montgomerie sat, each in an armchair.

"Left? Look, she threw me out when I was sixteen, on the morning of my sixteenth birthday. Mind, I wasn't bothered, she had made my life hell from the day my father disappeared to the day she gave me my marching orders. I was angry, bitter. That's how I got drunk and went crookin' and got into trouble with the polis. I've calmed down now, can't do a damn thing about it."

"About it?"

"That she murdered him."

"You believe that?"

"And her second husband, Clem Whitney."

King and Montgomerie glanced at each other and then looked at Oslen, who smiled, enjoying the effect his words were having.

"You don't know about him?"

"She said he left her."

"He disappeared, like my father did. He was also a rich man and after two years she inherited his wealth. I dare say you don't know about her parents, either?"

"Tell us," King said softly.

"She grew up in Clydebank."

"That's where your father's body was found. In an air-raid shelter, on a playing field."

"I think I know the one. It's very close to her parents' house. She would have known it, the building, throughout her childhood. So that's where she dumped him? Well. Anyway, her parents died when she was sixteen, in a house fire, she said. It was a bought house and was damaged in the blaze, but upon their deaths she inherited it and sold it as was, ye ken, a damaged house, but still

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worth a good few thousand. She lived on it until she met my father when she was in her early twenties, then lived off him."

"You think the blaze was suspicious?"

"Well, see, she never talked about it, never talked about her parents, as if they and the house had never existed. But the money was nice. That's a funny wee attitude for someone to take, unless, of course, she had a wee hand in the blaze with an eye to an early inheritance. If you get my drift?"

"We do!"

"She started bringing Clem Whitney into the house before my dad disappeared. After he disappeared, Whitney moved in. That was difficult for me."

"I'll bet. I'm sorry." Montgomerie spoke for the first time since entering the flat. "And he disappeared?"

"Don't you remember, the papers were full of it, about eight years ago?"

"He was *that* Whitney? Whitney's minimarkets?"

"Him. As soon as she could, she sold out to a Norwegian company. Nordic. That's how the minimarkets are all Nordics now. There's one at the bottom of the road here. She's got some money. First her parents, then my dad, then Clem Whitney."

"You never came to us with your suspicions?"

"Well, I didn't like the polis in my younger days, and it's only in this last year that I've pieced it all together in my head. But even so, what proof is there?"

"Well . . . might help you there, or you might help us." King took a watch from his pocket and handed it to Liam Oslen. "Do you recognise it?"

"Yes." Oslen held the watch in the palm of his hand. "Yes, definitely. Where did you get it?"

"It was found in close proximity to your father's corpse, actually in his hand. That links it positively to his death."

"It's the watch my father gave Muriel for their first wedding anniversary."

"You're certain?"

"Positive. I can swear to it."

"You may have to, but that's a weak link. It would come down to her word against yours. There's no inscription that we could find, for example."

"No, it doesn't, it doesn't come down to my word against hers."

"Oh?"

"No. Firstly, it's what's the word, one-off, be—"

"Bespoke?"

"Aye. It was made by a watchmaker in the town, Mitchells of Royal Exchange Square. They'll still have the records. That'll prove my father had it made and when."

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"That helps. It's enough for us to go and lift Muriel Whitney."

"I can do better than that." Liam Oslen stood and opened a drawer in an inexpensive sideboard and took out a bundle of photographs. He sifted through them. "I'm glad this is happening. I want to do this for my father, not myself."

"Yourself?"

"Well, if she is convicted of his murder, she loses everything she inherited from him and it will come to me. My father did say once that I'd be all right if anything happened to him, and knowing him, he'd have sorted that for me, but he died intestate—she must have got the will and destroyed it so he died intestate—and everything went to her eventually. She sucked him dry . . . like a leech . . . so this isn't for my wife and my wee girls. . . . Yes, here it is." He handed a photograph to King.

King looked at it and then passed it to Montgomerie. "This is it," he said.

"It's a portrait they had done, a photo portrait on their first wedding anniversary, the day he gave her the watch. You can see the watch you're holding is clearly the watch on her wrist. I mean, she's holding it up to the camera. I was there when the photograph was taken and I well mind the photographer suggesting she turn her wrist a wee bit so the watch shows clearly . . . and as it's the only watch of its kind, then . . ."

"Then apart from anything else, Mr. Oslen, this photograph makes you a very wealthy man." ●

"In accordance with the law, you have been given a jury of your peers."

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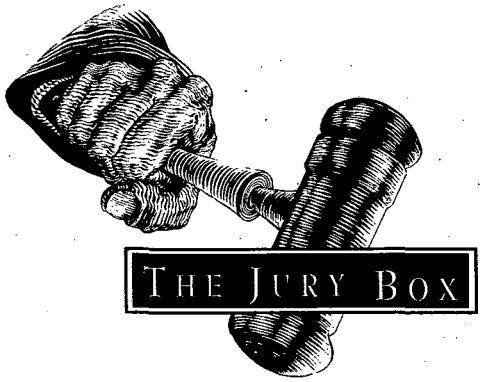

by Jon L. Breen

The elaborate, complex, and fairly-clued puzzles of the Golden Age of Detection have become almost a lost art in the mystery market of the 2000s. Some do not regret their decline—for weren't they terribly artificial and unrealistic? Maybe so, but no more so than the screen-inspired action scenes of today's thrillers or the superhuman emotional and physical resiliency of their protagonists. In terms of volume and quality, only Agatha Christie and John Dickson Carr could approach the Ellery Queen team in the fashioning of these grand edifices, and even a lesser Queen title from the thirties or forties is a thing of beauty. The Audio Editions Mystery Masters series (Audio Partners, 1133 High Street, Auburn, CA 95603), publisher of unabridged audiobooks of Christie, Sayers, and Stout, adds Queen to its offerings with Blain Fairman's effective reading of *The Dragon's Teeth* ($29.95), first published in 1939. It's not a typical EQ work, with elements of private eye (slight), romantic suspense (major), and Woolrichian pure suspense (one highly-effective escape scene in particular), and far from the best of the team's novels, but it provides the kind of mental workout that attracted many of us to detective fiction in the first place.

Where can you find a puzzle of comparable quality and complexity in today's market? You can't, but some writers at least are trying. Baantjer's *DeKok and the Sorrowing Tomcat* (St. Martin's/Minotaur, $23.95), first of the Amsterdam cop's cases to appear in U.S. hardcover, includes a couple of well-placed clues the Queen team wouldn't have thrown back. (Many other DeKok cases are available in trade paperback from Intercontinental, which first published this translation by H.G. Smittenaar in 1993.) And the highly regarded Michael Connelly is a stealth classicist, usually featuring ornate plots with fairly

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planted clues and sharing the Queenian proclivity for an elaborately reasoned false solution, followed by the real one. His latest is *A Darkness More Than Night* (Little, Brown, $25.95). For especially complex puzzles, try *The Poet* (1996; Warner, $7.99) or *Blood Work* (1998; Warner, $7.50).

*** Peter Tremayne: *Act of Mercy,* St. Martin's/Minotaur, $23.95. In her eighth book-length case, Sister Fidelma, lawyer sleuth of seventh-century Ireland, joins a shipboard pilgrimage to an Iberian shrine, and encounters murder along with the expected hardships of sea travel. The author, a prolific and respected scholar of the period whose real name is Peter Berresford Ellis, begins with an eight-page historical note, but the fascinating details of the time and place never overwhelm a compelling whodunit.

*** Paula L. Woods: *Stormy Weather,* Norton, $24.95. The second case for L.A. police detective Charlotte Justice is another winner, concerning the hurried demise of a dying actor-director who had been working on a documentary about African-Americans in Hollywood. The plot is nicely worked out, the characters involving, and best of all, though Justice comes equipped with the requisite tragic back-story, large extended family, and complicated love life, she sticks to the case at hand with minimal personal tangents.

*** Michael Bowen: *Screenscam,* Poisoned Pen, $24.95. Reluctantly representing the daughter of a prominent client in a plagiarism action against a motion picture company, Midwestern lawyer Rep Pennyworth confronts an elaborate plot that compromises the most revered of Hollywood institutions. Bowen, admired as a puzzle-spinner, is also one of crime fiction's wickedest satirists, with showbiz mores, law-firm politics, and online kinkiness among his targets. (This lampoon of the movie world would make a good movie.)

*** Joe L. Hensley: *Robak in Black,* St. Martin's/Minotaur, $23.95. Longstanding series lawyer Don Robak is now a judge—and a target. His wife's mysterious illness may be connected to the experiments of a local pharmaceutical company, and the head of a crazy militia whose son Robak put on death row is out to get him. The novel is notable for its parade of colorful characters, its evocation of the small-town Midwest, and its melancholic elegy for a stricken loved one.

*** Bill Crider, *A Romantic Way to Die,* St. Martin's/Minotaur, $22.95. Texas Sheriff Dan Rhodes has confronted more challenging mysteries in past books, but the background of a romance writers' conference is well imagined and the sly, deadpan wit is on target.

** Anne Perry, *Funeral in Blue,* Ballantine, $25. When Dr. Kristian Beck is accused of the

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strangling murder of his wife and an artist's model, his father-in-law defends him in the Old Bailey while William Monk investigates in Vienna the possible roots of the crime in the 1848 revolution. Readable and involving as the novel is, two unhappy trends of the series continue: tiresome padding and courtroom scenes that grow more absurd with each book. As for Monk's exchanges on feelings with other male characters, men don't talk like that now and I suspect did even less in Victorian times.

** Eric Van Lustbader: *Art Kills,* Carroll & Graf/Penzler, $12. In this novella, fine art appraiser Tess Chase, participant in a male lesbian fantasy, proves at least as unconvincing as Perry's sensitive blokes. An *EQMM* reviewer over fifty years ago (Howard Haycraft or Anthony Boucher?) grudgingly credited a well-known author with a comic-strip facility with plots. I'll grant Lustbader that, but his narrative and dialogue are miniseries creaky.

Among the reprints are two short novels by Earl Derr Biggers, *The Agony Column* (Wildside, $12.50) and *Fifty Candles* (Wildside, $12.99), first published in 1916 and 1926 respectively. They don't feature Charlie Chan, alas, but share the romantic outlook and period charm of the Chan series—and the latter novel includes the Honolulu setting.

The latest entry in the century anthology stakes was edited by Jeffery Deaver: *A Century of Great Suspense Stories* (Berkley, $29.95), a near-600-page compilation studded with great names like Barnard, Boucher, Highsmith, McBain, Queen, Rendell, Simenon, and Westlake. Given the emphasis on suspense, though, where are Charlotte Armstrong and Cornell Woolrich?

Collectors of two detective fiction icons, Dorothy L. Sayers and Arthur Conan Doyle, will want *Sayers on Holmes: Essays and Fiction on Sherlock Holmes* (Mythopoeic Press, P.O. Box 1363, Minnetonka, MN 55345-0363; $8), a 54-page booklet comprised of Alzina Stone Dale's introduction, five Sherlockian essays, a previously unpublished 1954 BBC radio script describing a meeting of Holmes and young Peter Wimsey, and Joe R. Christopher's annotated bibliography of Sayers's books.

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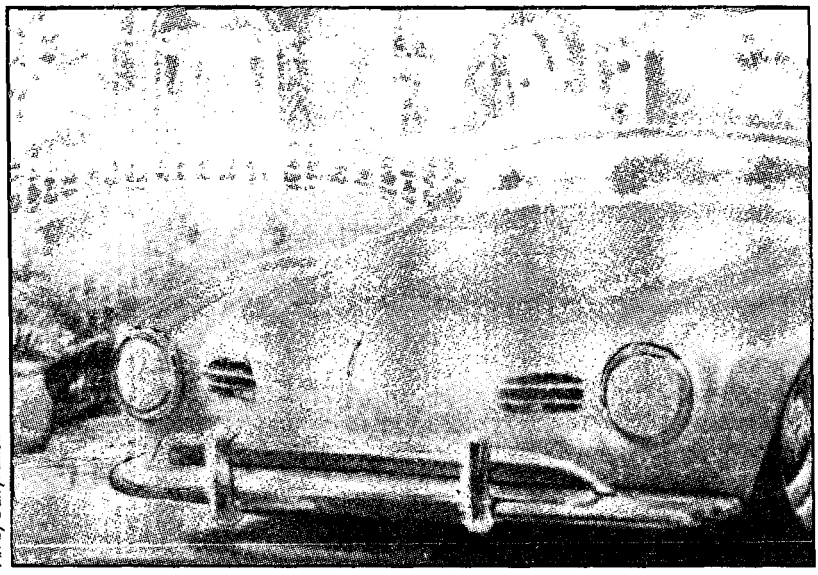

Art by Darryl Elliott

MAIN LINE LAZARUS

by Terence Faherty

1.

"You claim not to have any knowledge of Jim Skiles's disappearance, Mr. Keane, and yet you showed up at his cabin this morning with your lawyer in tow. That's a little suspicious, don't you think?"

The man with the pointed question was a sheriff named Chadwick, whose paternal facade was spoiled by a bull neck that was getting redder by the minute. There were four of us seated in Chadwick's sunny office in the Ocean County Courthouse in Tom's River, New Jersey: the sheriff, my friend Harry Ohlman, who happened to be a lawyer, Harry's wife Mary, and me.

"We've explained our presence at the cabin, Sheriff," Harry said in a tone so close to condescension I wanted to kick him. "Owen needed a ride down here to retrieve his car, which he left with Mr. Skiles. My wife and I were happy to help. In addition to having been Owen's employer until very recently, I'm an old friend of his. My wife and I are old friends of his. If necessary, we can prove a relationship of long standing with Owen. I was his college room-

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mate, for example, which is documented."

And Mary was my college love, I thought, which was totally undocumented. I wondered if she was thinking the same thing, but there was no way to tell. Harry, big-featured and darkly handsome, was showing the same signs of high blood pressure as the sheriff, but his wife was sitting with perfect relaxation in her Saturday sweater and tweedy slacks, her sky-blue eyes open and guileless, her face, beneath the Dorothy Hamill wedge of honey hair, pale but unconcerned. Was she confident in my innocence or in her husband's ability to argue? I couldn't tell that, either.

Terence Faherty's two mystery series—the Owen Keane and the Scott Elliott books and stories—have each been critically acclaimed, with a novel featuring Keane receiving an Edgar nomination and a book starring Elliott winning the PWA's Shamus Award. Mr. Faherty's new Keane story for *EQMM* fills in some of the interstices between novels. Don't miss his latest Keane book in paperback, *Orion Rising* (Worldwide Mystery/2/01). ✝

I forced my mind from Mary and back to the matter at hand as Chadwick addressed me.

"You said you first met Skiles last Wednesday, Mr. Keane?"

"Yes," Harry said before I could open my mouth. "Owen was down here doing some research for my firm, Ohlman, Ohlman, and Pulsifer." He gave the firm's Manhattan address, which the sheriff failed to jot down. "The subject of that research is, I'm afraid, confidential."

He had good reason to be afraid. My investigation of an old plane crash in the New Jersey Pine Barrens, a huge tract of sand and scrub pines on whose edge we currently sat, had come close to destroying the Ohlman family firm, because I'd uncovered two murders and attracted the enmity of a powerful corporation. That case was now safely closed, but it might open again in a hurry if Chadwick started poking around.

"Confidential," the sheriff repeated, getting close to condescension himself. "I've got a ransacked cabin and a missing old man, Mr. Ohlman. And I've got the suspicious circumstance of Mr. Keane here leaving his car in the middle of a forest and taking off. How do you explain that?"

"Owen and Skiles had a falling out," Harry said. "Owen came to see him in the first place because of Skiles's reputation as an authority on local history. Owen had been led to believe that Skiles was a native of the Pine Barrens and illiterate, but in the course of his visit to Skiles's cabin, Owen found a volume of essays

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with Skiles's name and a Philadelphia address written on its flyleaf. Skiles reacted badly to being found out. He contrived to strand Owen in the forest with night coming on."

My skin crawled as I remembered standing in the little fern-covered clearing and realizing that Skiles had slipped away. Then the nightmare march, fighting an endless tangle of pine branches and my own rising panic.

Harry failed to do the moment justice. "Owen made his way to State Road Five Thirty-nine, where he found Skiles waiting for him. Owen was able to flag down a ride and escape, leaving his car back at Skiles's cabin. We three drove down from New York City this morning to retrieve it. We found the front door of Skiles's cabin kicked in and the interior in total disarray."

"And you found Mr. Keane's car, which he'd left unlocked, totally untouched," Chadwick interrupted. I'd wondered about that myself, but Harry wouldn't be sidetracked so close to the end of his summation.

"While we were searching the cabin, the patrolmen you posted on the highway to keep an eye on Skiles's road arrived and took Owen into custody."

Harry's recounting was perfectly accurate. We'd driven down that morning without the slightest idea that we'd be facing anything more threatening than Skiles's bad temper. Even the sight of the patrol car parked opposite Skiles's sand road hadn't broken through our blissful ignorance. That happy mood had taken us as far as Skiles's shattered front door. We'd found the three rooms beyond the door thoroughly tumbled about. They didn't have the look of rooms that had been searched; the result was more chaotic, like a tornado had blown through. On the other hand, except for the front door, there hadn't been much real damage, either. None of the windows were broken out, for example.

Of the cabin's owner, there'd been no sign, dead or alive. And though there'd been a number of books in the wreckage, ripped from Skiles's secret library, we'd failed to find the collection of essays that had gotten me into trouble on my first visit, the little leather-bound volume of Montaigne. I'd located the old metal breadbox in which Skiles had hidden the book, but inside that I'd found only a yellowed index card on which was written a name, Eva Lisk, and four Philadelphia addresses, all but the last one crossed off.

I'd been in the process of pocketing the card when Chadwick's men had shown up. Now, before I could stop myself, I reached up to touch the shirt pocket where the card currently resided, a move that might have been fatal if Chadwick had been paying attention. But he was smiling over his own memories of the ransacked cabin.

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"Gleason got the shock of his life when he found all those books scattered around," the sheriff said happily. "Skiles took him in but good with that illiterate act."

"Tim Gleason," I said by way of reentering the conversation. Editor of a local paper, the *Sunbeam,* and the man who had suggested I visit Skiles in the first place.

"The same," the sheriff said. "He's the one who found the cabin all upside down. He drove back in there yesterday to apologize to Skiles for sending you in uninvited, so to speak. When he found what he found, he rushed to Bargersville, to the nearest phone, and called me."

"And you did what?" Harry asked.

"Started to check Skiles's background, which is what Gleason should have done when he first heard of the guy, instead of accepting him as a born-and-bred Piney and writing stories about him. Still, Skiles has been living in those woods longer than Gleason's been alive, so I guess I can't fault him too much. We'd only just gotten started on our background work when you three showed up and disturbed what may be a crime scene."

"We did what any conscientious citizens would do," Harry said, inspiring me to sit up straighter. "Which was to ascertain whether Skiles was lying hurt inside. While we're on the subject, why wasn't the cabin clearly marked as a crime scene?"

"Like I said, we've only just started looking into this. We didn't even know if we had one missing man or two. We couldn't contact Mr. Keane here at the address he gave when he registered his car. He'd moved to . . ." He let the statement trail into a question.

"Brooklyn," I said, hoping for the laugh the name always seemed to rate on television. I didn't get it.

"Are you sure you didn't leave the cabin unsecured and post a patrol car nearby hoping to entrap Owen when he came back for his car?" Harry demanded.

"How was I to know he'd even left the area?" Chadwick replied a little warmly. "In fact, how can I be sure he did leave the area? What proof do I have that he didn't arrange a rendezvous with you and your wife somewhere in the county just before you drove up to the cabin? Aside, of course, from the testimony of two old and dear friends."

"The Thompsons," Mary said from behind her hand. She'd listened to the whole story of my run-in with Skiles on the drive down. And taken notes, evidently.

"Right," Harry said, without missing a beat. "If necessary, we can produce the testimony of the couple who picked Owen up Wednesday night when he hitchhiked out. The Thompsons of . . ."

"Allentown," I said, not hiding behind my hand.

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"Of Allentown. They saw Skiles alive and well by the side of Five Thirty-nine. My office can trace them in less than an hour."

"You must run a very efficient operation," the sheriff said evenly. He settled back in his chair, his uniform shirt wrinkling as though he were leaking air. "Well, I must own that I'm disappointed. I'd hoped you could shed some light on this, Mr. Keane. I suppose there's no point in spoiling more of your Saturday. Or of holding on to your car. You brought it along when you agreed to accompany my deputies, I hear. Just leave your current address so we can come see you if the Thompsons thing doesn't pan out."

Harry and Mary began to stir, but I settled in, à la Chadwick. I was curious about something, a not uncommon condition with me. "You said you'd started to check into Skiles's background, Sheriff. What have you found?"

If Chadwick heard Harry's sigh, he ignored it. "No offense, Mr. Keane, but why should I give you my information when you have nothing to give me?"

"A trade?" I asked, and thought about it. "What's the name of the place in Bargersville where Tim Gleason placed his panic call to you?"

"Nash's. It's what they used to call a general store. Now I guess you'd call it a convenience store."

"Ask them if Skiles made a long-distance call from their phone the day before Gleason was in. On Thursday, the day after I talked to Skiles. That will give you something to trace."

Chadwick stared at me for a moment. Then he pushed a button on his phone and told the voice that answered to place the call. After another minute's staring, he was speaking to someone at Nash's and nodding his head.

"How'd you know?" he asked when he'd hung up.

"I guessed," I said.

"That so? Well, even a guess is worth something. So I'll tell you this much. Once upon a time, our Mr. Skiles was a lawyer, like Mr. Ohlman here. Must not have been quite as good as Mr. Ohlman or not quite as lucky, because he ended up serving a nice little prison term."

2.

"Did you hear that guy?" Harry was actually stomping his feet as we stepped from the courthouse into the October sunshine. "That Chadwick made it sound like all lawyers belong in jail. The only ones not locked up are just lucky."

"Or good," Mary reminded him, patting his arm.

"Skiles a lawyer," I said, amazed. "He hates lawyers." He'd managed to work that into our brief conversation more than once.

"Who doesn't?" the still-wounded Harry demanded.

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"Maybe that's the way his prison time left him," Mary said. "Or maybe it's a reaction to whatever sent him to prison."

We reached our cars, which were parked side by side. My 1965 Volkswagen Karmann-Ghia looked tiny next to the Ohlmans' shiny new 1981 Lincoln. In fact, it looked depressingly like the circus car all the clowns climb out of. Those two cars were apt symbols for the very different paths our lives had taken since college. The Ohlmans were successful up-and-comers who'd even found time to have a daughter, Amanda, currently in the care of Mary's parents. I'd held a number of dead-end jobs, most recently the research position with Harry's firm. But I'd always only been one thing: a compulsive pursuer of mysteries, large and small.

"So are you going to tell us?" Mary asked me. And then, as I blinked at her, "How you knew Skiles had made that phone call. Did he ask for spare change as you were hitchhiking by the road that night?"

I tried to reconstruct my chain of logic, or rather construct one to impress Mary, since my admission to Chadwick that I'd simply guessed pretty much described my standard procedure. "It can't be a coincidence that Skiles disappeared just after I spoke with him. My visit has to be the cause of his disappearance."

"Because of the Carteret business?" Harry asked, nervously naming the case that had almost scuttled his firm.

"No. Because I got Skiles thinking back on his past by stumbling across his old Philadelphia address. And then running off without hearing his story. He tried to get me to listen to it right at the end. But I was too busy escaping. So I left him stirred up on the subject."

"I'm with you so far," Mary said.

"The rest is easy. It can't be that Skiles's past just happened to catch up with him the moment I left him. Too big a coincidence again. So Skiles must have gotten in touch with someone from that past. By phone, given how fast things happened after that."

Harry shouldered in then. "You asked about that phone in Bargersville because it's the one the Gleason guy used. The nearest phone to the cabin, the sheriff said. Whomever Skiles called arranged for him to be snatched or mentioned the call to the wrong person and that someone made the arrangements. How long did the old guy live in the woods?"

"I don't know. Decades."

We were sitting on our cars, Harry on mine and me, in retaliation, on his. Mary stood between us.

"I wonder what they were searching for in his cabin," she said.

Harry shared my impression of the damage. "Didn't look like a search to me. Looked like somebody just wrecked the place. Maybe using Skiles as a wrecking ball."

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"What could he have done to have earned a grudge like that?" Mary asked. "Run off with tong money?"

"Mafia money around here," Harry said. "But Skiles wouldn't have gone to prison for that. He'd have gone into heavy construction. Literally." When I failed to laugh, Harry finally noticed that I hadn't joined in the guessing game. "What's the matter, Owen?"

"Skiles didn't change his name."

"That's right," Mary said. "If he was hiding from someone, he would have. And he didn't move very far from Philadelphia. Only about what, fifty miles?"

"That cabin of his is farther from Philly than the moon," her husband said.

"And he let that editor interview him for the local paper," Mary continued without noting the interruption. "A man hiding out wouldn't do that. Not unless he wanted to be caught."

"Maybe he did want to be caught," Harry said. "Maybe he's been wanting his past to catch up with him for years. Maybe he was sick of using an outhouse. Owen blundering in just made his mind up for him."

"What could he have done?" Mary's rhetorical question brought us full circle, which Harry and I acknowledged by standing. Mary took my hand. "Where are you off to now, Owen?"

Earlier that morning I couldn't have answered the question. Not truthfully. Now I said, "The City of Brotherly Love."

"To trace Skiles?"

"To help him. I owe him that. For blundering in. I just wish I knew everything Chadwick knows."

"I can do better than that," Harry said. "If Skiles was a Philadelphia lawyer and he went to prison, the fraternity will remember him. We have pretty close ties to one of the older firms down there. In fact, we recently did them a favor. They'd be happy to repay it with a little gossip."

"Do they gossip on Saturdays?"

"You want me to call them today?"

"Yesterday might not be soon enough, not from Skiles's point of view."

Harry nodded. "How will I get in touch with you?"

"I'll get in touch with you. In an hour?"

"Be a sport. Give me two."

He was already getting his reward: Mary was hugging him. She hugged me next. "Be careful, Owen."

"You know me."

That must have been the wrong thing to say, because her hug stiffened until we were standing together as uncomfortably as junior-high dance partners. I kissed her as I wiggled free, shook her husband's hand, and headed west.

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3.

I took my time crossing New Jersey, allowing the Ghia to be passed by every dump truck and farm implement on the Atlantic City Expressway. I told myself that I was giving Harry time to reach home and track down his informants by phone, but my wandering thoughts returned again and again to the condition of Skiles's cabin and to Harry's mob hypothesis.

I was aided in my dawdling by the traffic. Philly traffic, I mentally called it, though it began in Jersey as little roads and big roads came together to form the approach to the Walt Whitman Bridge. Several lanes of the bridge had been closed for some Saturday maintenance. We crossed the Delaware at a crawl, which made it safe for me to gawk at passing container ships and—down toward the bay—a giant tanker. On the western side I traded expressways for normal streets as soon as I could, making my way into the heart of the old city circumspectly.

As I drove from one red light to the next, I had the odd feeling that I was recreating my expedition into the Pine Barrens, the one that had taken me to Skiles in the first place. The landscape couldn't have been more different, more urban, both sides of the street lined with buildings—first warehouses, then office buildings, then row houses—all packed as tightly together as the Pines' namesake trees. Still, the déjà vu was there, prompted by the feeling that I was once again moving into Skiles's domain, a place where I was a stranger and he was right at home.

Or maybe not. Fairmount Park, when I finally found it, looked very little like the old engraving of it I'd seen on the wall of Skiles's cabin during my unhappy first visit. I hit the park near its southernmost tip, a thin strip on the banks of the Schuykill River. Pickup basketball games were the first signs of life on this mild fall day. As I drove north through the park, the ground became hillier and the trees thicker, some of them already shed of their leaves and some barely turned, and the ballplayers gave way to joggers and walkers of large, dangerous-looking dogs.

Near the reservoir, I turned east and found the street I was after, Thirtieth Street, only a block or two from the edge of the green space. The houses were older than I'd expected, nineteenth-century banker specials, most of them stone or brick and a few rundown to the point of collapse. Here and there a house had been brought back to nearly new condition and stood out like a gold tooth in a skull.

Skiles's old home, if the address in his secret books had in fact been his home, hadn't been restored. Nor would it ever be, for the simple reason that it was gone, replaced by a rubble-strewn lot. I spoke with those neighbors I could find and learned that the house had been torn down four or five years earlier, following a

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space-heater fire. None of the neighbors could remember the names of the home's last residents, and no one had heard of the Skiles family.

By then it was past my lunchtime. At one end of the block, an old mansard-roofed building had been turned into a neighborhood store. Someone had hand-lettered a menu of its principal offerings on one outside wall, and the fifth item from the bottom of the list caught my eye: hoagies. I knew hoagie to be Philadelphian for submarine sandwich, so I moved the Ghia to the nearest parking space and went inside.

The man who made my Italian sub—working in an island counter around which the store's shelves were arranged—was a neighborhood veteran who had survived the hard years and now saw sunny days ahead.

"You seen them houses they're fixing up. You mark my words, ten years from now this whole street will be turned around. When them whatcha call 'em—yuppies—get done, we'll have brick sidewalks and them fancy gas streetlights. You come back in nineteen ninety-one and see."

"I hope I can," I said.

"Young guy like you? What's your problem?"

I thought of my immediate one. I inquired after a public phone and then, remembering Nash's general store and my earlier lucky guess, I described Skiles and asked if he'd stopped by to make a call.

"Little old white guy needs a shave?" the store owner repeated. "Dressed in a flannel shirt and rolled-up pants? Give him a bottle in a paper bag, and he'd be our old clientele. That's all behind us now."

4.

The phone hung on the front wall of the store, next to a display of antifreeze. I called Harry collect just for the fun of listening to him accept the charges.

"You okay, Owen?" Harry asked when the operator had left us.

"So far. But Skiles's old address near Fairmount Park is just a gap in the street. I hope you've done better."

"I think I may have," he said, his false modesty coming across louder than his words. "I was able to reach a senior member of that firm I mentioned. So senior I was sure he'd be at home. I just wasn't sure his nurse would pass him the phone."

I noted that Harry hadn't mentioned the senior member's name. For fear I'd show up on his doorstep, probably. I was too busy eavesdropping to take offense. In the background I could make out a baby crying—Amanda, rescued from her grandparents. I heard Mary next, first speaking and then, faintly, crooning.

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"Anyway," Harry was saying, "this guy remembered Skiles right away. And the old scandal. Got some paper to write on?"

"Yes," I said. I had the waxed stuff still wrapped around my hoagie. That paper wouldn't have been a very discreet choice, as it had been rendered transparent by leaking Italian dressing. Not that it mattered. I didn't have anything to write with, but Harry hadn't asked me about that.

"Around nineteen fifty Skiles was a junior associate in the law firm of Gimbel and Bellaby. They specialized in estate planning and trust management for Main Line families."

"Main Line families?"

"Philly's social-register set. You must have heard of the Main Line. You grew up right across the river."

"Not right across," I said in my defense. "It does sound familiar. Did they take the name from a rail line?"

"Exactly. The old main line of the Pennsylvania Railroad. It ran through a series of villages where Philadelphia's rich and famous resettled when they outgrew places like Skiles's Fairmount Park neighborhood. You've heard of Ardmore, right? And Bryn Mawr?"

"Right," I said.

"Gimbel and Bellaby catered to that fox-hunting crowd. Henry Gimbel was old money himself, Alexander Bellaby less so."

"What about James Skiles?"

"His family was around the day the Liberty Bell cracked," Harry said, trying to be colorful. "Just the kind of man Gimbel and Bellaby would want on board. Lots of connections and no risk. Or so they must have thought. You getting all this down?"

"Spell Gimbel."

As he did, I traced the letters with my finger in the dust on an antifreeze container.

"The scandal involved the misappropriation of funds from a trust set up for a severely disabled boy by his parents. There was a lot more money in it than was needed for the kid's care, and Skiles helped himself to the surplus. He must have felt safe enough doing it because the parents were dead and the boy was in no shape to ask for an accounting."

"What was his name?"

"My contact couldn't remember, which I'm not sure I believe, since he did recall that the poor kid died sometime in the early sixties, years after Skiles went to prison."

"How did Skiles get caught? Some kind of internal audit?"

"No. An internal audit at a place like Gimbel and Bellaby would have stayed internal. Skiles was turned in—fingered, you detective types would say—by a disgruntled former employee. The story I was told had a Gimbel and Bellaby secretary being let go for some infraction unrelated to the embezzlement. She knew about it

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though and called the police as her way of getting back at the firm. At least, that's how my contact reconstructed things at the time, after he'd done a little poking around. A friendly policeman told him that their tips had come in the form of phone calls from an anonymous woman.

"You're going to ask me next what the secretary's name was. My gossip hound couldn't remember her name, either. I believed him on that count because he made a genuine effort. He said it was something like that old soap brand, Lux."

"It wasn't Lux," I said. I dug in my pocket for the clue I'd forgotten I had, the index card I'd been examining in Skiles's cabin when the patrol car pulled up. "Her name was Lisk. Eva Lisk."

5.

For a long time after I'd finished with Harry, I stood staring at the little yellowed card. The four addresses, three crossed out, and the deteriorating handwriting suggested that Skiles had kept track of Eva Lisk for years, perhaps ever since he'd been released from prison. But why?

Had Lisk been the recipient of Skiles's mystery phone call? No phone numbers were listed on the card, but a number was easy enough to get if you had a name and an address. I was tempted to call information myself right then, to phone Lisk and warn her. But trying to phrase that warning stopped me. Beware of a man you wronged thirty years ago. It didn't make sense, not in the context of Skiles's wrecked cabin. He was the victim, not the danger.

Still, for lack of a better move, I decided to visit Eva Lisk. I asked the man who had made my uneaten lunch for directions to her last address, 811 Linden Avenue. He sold me a map with a closeup of the downtown on one side and Philly and its suburbs on the other. I needed the larger-scale map to find Linden Avenue, which was in the northeast part of the city, just shy of the Bucks County line.

Unfortunately for the property values, Lisk's neighborhood was also very close to I-95 and a parallel corridor of railroad tracks as wide as the interstate and overhung with power lines for electric locomotives. Not Fairmount Park for atmosphere, but the neighborhood I found beyond the tracks was a living one, with Halloween pumpkins on the front steps and kids playing around the parked cars while their parents raked up leaves and memories in tiny yards.

No such seasonal activity was on display at 811 Linden, the better-kept half of a well-kept double. Things were so quiet, in fact, that I thought I'd reached another dead end. Then, after my third go-round with the doorbell, I heard a chain rattling and a bolt snapping back.

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Eva Lisk was fifty-something, which meant she'd been in her twenties when she and Skiles had interacted so unhappily. She was small and iron-haired, with big, almost-black eyes whose darkness seemed to have bled outward into her otherwise sallow skin.

"My name is Owen Keane," I said. "I'm looking into the disappearance of James Skiles."

A name from her distant past, but it didn't take her a full second to place him. "Him," she said, almost sneering it.

"May I come in?"

"No." She looked toward her nearest raking neighbor. Her protection from me, I realized. But she made no move to call to him or to close her door, so I reconciled myself to the porch.

"Have you heard from Skiles recently?" I asked.

"Recently? Not recently. Not since he fired me. Not since he sent me out to starve, with a baby on the way."

"You were pregnant?" I hadn't raised my voice, but Lisk reacted as though I'd shouted, stepping backward into the house. I followed her, blocking the doorway.

"Skiles disappeared from . . . from where he's been living since he got out of prison," I said before she could order me out. "He may have been abducted. I think it could have something to do with Gimbel and Bellaby."

"Gimbel and Bellaby," she said, really sneering this time. "Those old hypocrites. I waited years to read their obituaries—decades for Bellaby's—and they were all lies. Nothing about their shady deals. Nothing about how they kicked a girl out in the street for being pregnant with no husband. Or had their hatchet man, James Skiles, do it."

"You were fired for being pregnant?"

"What did I just tell you?"

"Was Skiles the father?" I asked, revealing that I'd spent too much time with paperback mysteries and not enough with Montaigne.

"Are you crazy? Do you think I would have let him get away with what he did if he'd been the one who knocked me up?"

"Did you let him get away with it?" I used my best accusatory voice, but Lisk ignored the question, returning to the cheery subject of obituaries.

"When the *Inquirer* ran Bellaby's notice last year, I almost wrote them a letter. I wanted to tell the whole city the truth about him. I would have, too, if it hadn't been for Joan, his wife, the angel. I wouldn't have been able to raise my baby, my Vera, without her, never would have been able to send her to college without those checks every month. She had a conscience. She knew what her husband and her brother had done to me."

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"Her brother? Henry Gimbel?"

"No, James Skiles, that no-good son of a bitch. Probably wouldn't have gotten his job in the first place if his sister hadn't been married to a senior partner. How she picked a man like Alexander Bellaby to marry, I'll never understand. But for her sake, I held my peace about him. I wouldn't do anything to hurt her."

"You sent her brother to prison."

Lisk's smile chilled me. "He sent himself," she said.

6.

Eva Lisk had given me a lot to think about, but instead I wasted time wondering why Harry's contact hadn't mentioned Skiles's angelic sister. Before I was settled again in the Ghia's worn driver's seat, I'd decided that I had to talk to Joan Bellaby.

That left the problem of finding her. Luckily, my late, unlamented days with Harry's firm had been largely spent doing library research. I considered various options, including obtaining a copy of her husband's obituary in the hope it would mention a church or a lodge. But I began where I always began, with my personal oracle and the amateur detective's best friend, the phone book. I didn't expect to find someone of Bellaby's social standing in the "Philadelphia and Suburban Areas" white pages—especially not in the grease-stained copy I borrowed at an Amoco station near the interstate—and I didn't. I did find the next listing I looked for, the one for Philly's Free Public Library.

I punched the number into the gas station's phone and asked for the social sciences department. Harry had called Philadelphia's wealthy the "social-register set." I'd heard the expression before, of course, but I wasn't sure if the register referred to was a physical document or a state of mind. Still, it couldn't hurt to ask.

The social sciences phone was answered by a gentleman with an Indian accent. I asked him my basic question: Was there such a thing as a social register?

"Yes," he said, "but you're not in it."

I begged his pardon.

He laughed. "I always say, 'If you have to ask, you're not in it.'"

"Ah," I said, laughing myself, or trying to. "But there is such a book."

"Certainly. Published annually by the Social Register Association. Contains names, addresses, phone numbers, and social organization memberships."

I asked him to look up Joan Bellaby. Before the first negative thought could enter my head, he was back on the line with Bellaby's address, which was in a suburb called Ashcroft.

According to my trusty map, it was closer to Independence Hall than Eva Lisk's neighborhood, though outside the formal bound-

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ary of the city, being due west and therefore farther from the river along which Philly sprawled. Ashcroft was nestled between two of the towns Harry had mentioned, Ardmore and Bryn Mawr. In other words, it was on the Main Line, Gimbel and Bellaby's old hunting grounds. I drove south briefly on I-95, picked up I-76, and followed it north and west to the old Lincoln Highway, which shadowed the rail line that had given the area its name. I shadowed it, too.

There was a village feel to Ashcroft. It had a central square, a little green space bordered by a drug store, a one-room train station, and a restaurant named, in what I assumed was a burst of candor, the Snooty Fox. The neighborhoods arranged around this center were less forthcoming, thanks to some very mature landscaping and impressive walls, complete with gates. Luckily, the drawbridge was down at Joan Bellaby's Ashcroft Terrace, which is to say, the front gate stood open. No one was out raking leaves in the yards I passed on her curving, tree-lined street, and no children were dodging cars.

The Bellaby place was genuinely impressive: large enough to be a mansion and not just a house with pretensions. It was built of gray stone and had the soaring roofline of a French château. The drive had its own gate, but like the main one, this backup was open. An open door or gate usually suggested a trap to me, and this wrought-iron number was no exception. I took the precaution of turning my Volkswagen around and pointing it toward the street before I left it on the apron of paving stones that led to the front walk.

By the time I'd rung the bell, my paranoia had given way to self-criticism, my other standby. I was asking myself what visiting mansions had to do with helping Skiles, who was probably lying hurt or dead within a hundred yards of his cabin. I'd no sooner had the thought than I was picturing the scene, with Skiles's body a little bump in the forest floor covered over with pine needles. Then the door opened, and I stood face-to-face with the corpse himself: Jim Skiles.

7.

I might not have recognized Skiles if he hadn't been in every other thought I'd had that day. He'd shaved his tight beard from his leathery face and slicked back his gray hair. In place of the flannel shirt and army-surplus pants in which I'd previously seen him, he wore a dark blue suit, a crisp white shirt, and a paisley tie.

Then he smiled, and the holes in that smile left by Pine Barrens dentistry increased his resemblance to my storytelling hermit wonderfully. "Owen Keane," he said, "the ghost chaser himself. What in the world are you doing here?"

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"Looking for my car," I managed to say.

The non sequitur didn't even slow Skiles down. "However did you find me?"

"That's a long story. The Ocean County police picked me up at your cabin this morning. The place had been ransacked, and you were missing."

For a moment, Skiles's little eyes lost their twinkle. "Missing? I was right here. Do I look missing?"

"Guess you forgot to leave a forwarding address."

"Guess I did. Didn't think anybody would care. Come on in, long as you're here. Let's make ourselves comfortable."

My distrust of the old man was still such that I hesitated on the threshold. He pretended not to notice, walking away slowly and talking to me over his shoulder as though I were once again following him along a woodland path.

"My cabin ransacked, you say? Sounds like the work of my neighbors down the road, the Perkins brothers. Always up to no good, when they're up at all."

By then I'd caught up with him, unwilling to miss a word of his explanation. We crossed a foyer of white marble, passing beneath a chandelier suspended from a domed ceiling several floors above us. Skiles led me through double doors and into a study, massively furnished but cold, the walls showing the naked gray stone of the exterior.

"My late brother-in-law's cozy little getaway," Skiles said. "His suit, too. What do you think of the fit?"

"Not much," I said, though it was no baggier than the last outfit I'd seen him in.

Skiles showed his laugh lines again. "Maybe I'll grow into it. The food's good around here. Have a seat."

He chose one of a pair of leather armchairs placed midway between a Spanish Inquisition desk and a dead fireplace. I sat in the facing chair.

"Coffee, Mr. Keane? Something stronger? No? Well then, why don't you tell me how you tracked me down."

I started with Sheriff Chadwick's teasing reference to Skiles's past.

"The sheriff called here just about an hour ago," Skiles said. "He'd traced that reverse charges call I'd made from Nash's."

"He didn't tell you about your cabin?"

"I never gave him the chance. Never had any use for policemen. And he started off with that nonsense about me being missing. Guess I should have heard him out."

"Why did you call your sister?"

"Never tell two stories at once, son. Finish yours first."

I picked up with the gossip Harry had collected. Again Skiles

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interrupted. "Forgot you worked for a lawyer. If there's anything a lawyer can dig up in a hurry, it's dirt on another lawyer."

That left me with Eva Lisk. Skiles shook his head steadily as I recounted my interview with the ex-secretary. When I absent-mindedly produced the index card that had led me to her, he leaned forward suddenly and snatched it from my hand.

"Where'd you get that? Helped yourself to it in my cabin, didn't you? Maybe you're the one who did the ransacking after all."

"Why did you keep track of her all these years?"

"That's my personal business."

We stared at each other for a time, as we'd once done deep in a pine forest. I'd broken first then, and I broke first now.

"You were going to tell me how you came to be here."

Skiles stood up. "First there's someone I'd like you to meet."

8.

He led me far into the house, so far we came out the other side. Or almost out. We ended up in a large greenhouse tacked onto the rear of the mansion, a hot, humid greenhouse, thanks to the still-potent sun. I immediately thought of Philip Marlowe's interview with General Sternwood at the start of *The Big Sleep,* and not just because of the steamy setting. Skiles had brought me to meet his sister, and, like Sternwood, she was confined to a wheelchair.

That was as far as her resemblance to the frail general went, for Joan Bellaby, though an invalid, was anything but delicate. As we approached, she was supervising the trimming of a large rubbery-looking plant in drill sergeant tones. She took it down a notch when she spotted her brother and ceased fire entirely when she saw me.

"Jimmy," she said. "Why didn't you tell me we had company?"

Her mildly reproachful tone was more than canceled out by the grateful looks the two assistant gardeners laid on Skiles as they gathered up their tools. He lost that good will by telling them we'd only be staying a minute.

"Just a friend who was worried about me," Skiles said after the formal introductions. "Owen here is in our old business, the law."

Bellaby was dubious. She was as tiny as Eva Lisk, but not as spare, and she wore a paisley dress that came remarkably close to matching her brother's tie. She also had his small keen eyes and very gray hair. Absent was his easy smile. "A lawyer?" she asked.

"A hanger-on," I said, though even that was no longer true.

"Well, any friend of Jimmy's is welcome here. Although I must say, the way he described his recent life, I expected all his acquaintances to be wearing coonskin caps."

"Mine's grazing out front," I said, surprising even myself. I'd

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decided this conversation was one of Skiles's famous stalls, and that had spoiled my manners.

Bellaby didn't hold the lapse against me. "I'm glad there was someone looking out for Jimmy. I know what it's like not to have anyone." As there were two servants hovering within ten feet of her, I figured she was referring to some long past life. She wasn't. "It's made the biggest difference for me to have my brother here. You can't imagine."

At that point, Skiles announced that I had to be going and led me away. Before we'd gotten out of earshot of the conservatory, the defoliation project was on again.

9.

We went back through the house the way we'd come. This time I was able to spot two more servants, young women in formal black and white, taken unawares by Skiles the woodsman and his habitually stealthy movements. Then we were back in the study, and it was story time. My host was in the mood to pace—back and forth across the cold hearth—so I stood, too, with my wing chair between us.

"Promised I'd tell you how I came to be here, Mr. Keane. I have to start with a little correcting. You see, most of the old gossip you dug up—the official history of James Skiles—is just plain wrong. I did work for Gimbel and Bellaby, of course, and I was disbarred and sent to prison. But I never took any money. Don't know why I should care what you, a relative stranger, think of me, but there it is: I do."

"There was no embezzlement?"

"Oh, there was plenty of that. It was the work of my employers and benefactors, Henry Gimbel and Alexander Bellaby. They'd gotten into some short-term financial difficulties and dipped into that trust. They didn't think anyone knew about it—I surely didn't—but someone else did."

"Eva Lisk."

"The very one. As luck would have it, Miss Lisk got herself in the family way right about that time. We couldn't have an unwed mother besmirching the holy name of Gimbel and Bellaby, so those two sanctimonious crooks decided she had to go. I was given the unpleasant task of firing her."

"So when she called the police anonymously to report the embezzlement, she named you."

"I was fresh in her mind, so to speak. That left me with a dilemma. I could have cleared myself, but only at the expense of my brother-in-law, which is the same as saying, at the expense of my sister. I couldn't do that to her, so I took the blame and went to prison.

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"That's a lot of what I wanted to tell you last Wednesday night out beside Five Thirty-nine. Not that it would have made much sense to you then. But your finding that book with my old address in it had gotten me wanting to talk about my past in the worst way. I'd avoided that temptation for twenty years, a real accomplishment for a gregarious soul like me. I sometimes think that's why I became a storyteller in the first place—one of the reasons—to relieve the pressure of not being able to tell the one story I really owned, my miserable life's story.

"Anyway, once you'd gone I was in a quandary. I couldn't talk to anyone in the Pines without exposing myself as a phony. And an ex-con to boot. It came to me to call someone who already knew my history. Joan, my sister. To be honest, I'd had it in my mind to do that for some time. We'd been out of touch so long.

"I caught me a ride to Bargersville the very next day and did the deed. Ended up being quite a phone call, with me so wrought up to start with and Joan telling me about Alex passing on and her being forced into a wheelchair by her arthritis. She begged me to come see her, and I said I would."

That memory stopped him in his tracks, but only for a moment. "I went home long enough to pack a few things I really didn't need, like a certain book of essays. Then I set out, using your method." He pantomimed a hitchhiker. "That's how I came to be here. No big mystery, you see. Guess I should have left a note on my cabin door, but, more than likely, the Perkins boys would have just torn it up."

"More than likely," I said. "Why are you wearing the lawyer outfit?"

Skiles resumed his pacing. "I could call it camouflage—make a joke of it—but the truth's a little more complicated than that. You see, Joan wants me to move in here with her. She's pretty well fixed—very well fixed—but she's lonely. Her idea is, we should take care of one another. Keep each other company, now that we're old."

"How do you feel about that?"

"Ambivalent. There's a word I couldn't use as Jim Skiles the illiterate storyteller. Ambivalent. I mean to say, Joan's my sister. She looked out for me in the old days. Got me my start at Gimbel and Bellaby. Talked me into the profession of law in the first place. All I really wanted to do back in college was study American folklore. There was quite a flowering in that field just before the war."

"Sounds like what I found you doing," I said.

"Exactly. My name was mud around these parts after the scandal. And I knew about the Pine Barrens from my college studies. So, when I got out of prison, I disappeared into that great woodland, just as outcasts and outlaws have done since colonial times. Made a new life for myself. Not the most comfortable life, but one I've enjoyed. One I'd miss.

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"But that decision is my problem, not yours. You've got questions you want to ask, I know. You're a man who wears his questions like a lover wears his heart, right on your sleeve. But I have to ask for a slight recess. I promised Joan I'd have a little chat with the cook. Been putting it off all day. It won't take but a few minutes. Make yourself at home."

10.

I sat down in the wing chair after Skiles left me, but less than a minute later I was up again, pacing as he had done on the hearth. It didn't help. Things just weren't coming together the way I'd expected them to when my only goal had been to find Skiles and hear his story.

That story had been far from his best work. It hadn't explained anything, not convincingly. Not his wrecked cabin, not his long surveillance of Eva Lisk, not his sacrificial jail term. The story hadn't even explained my presence in the Bellaby mansion in a way I could accept. I couldn't believe I'd come to Ashcroft in response to a false alarm. In fact, I was beginning to suspect that I hadn't even come of my own free will.

An ordinary black telephone occupied a very modest place on the Spanish desk. I dialed Harry's number, not bothering to reverse the charges. He and Amanda answered. I could hear the baby's cooing so clearly that I knew her head had to be resting on Harry's shoulder, inches from the phone.

"Owen. What is it now?"

"Something you told me earlier that I didn't pick up on right away. You said the police had received anonymous calls—plural—regarding the embezzlement. Is that what you meant to say? Was there more than one call?"

Amanda murmured something I couldn't quite catch while Harry pondered. Then he said, "Yes. I'm pretty sure I was told that. I'm positive. The first call exposed the graft. The second named Skiles. Why, is that important?"

"Just updating my notes," I said, and hung up.

I made my way back through the house, wishing I'd left a trail of breadcrumbs on my previous trip. Eventually, I found the conservatory. Joan Bellaby and her crew were still there, though they'd moved on to a new bed. A little black plaque on its edge said that it contained philodendrons, though the stalky plants were many times the size of the vine of that name dying back in my Brooklyn apartment.

"Mr. Keane," Bellaby said. "I understood that you had gone. Where's Jimmy?"

"Talking with the cook. I thought we might chat, too." I looked

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toward her two assistants as I added, "I'd like to ask you about Eva Lisk."

"Time for a break, Luis," Bellaby said without taking her eyes from mine.

The gardeners hurried off toward the back of the greenhouse. I watched them go, listening to the sounds of the place, the hum of the exhaust fans and the steady cascade of water into some unseen pond. I said, "So you recognize the name."

"I'm not likely to forget the name of the viper who sent my brother to prison."

"Happen to know where she is now?"

"In hell, I hope."

Where I was welcome to join her. There was some movement in the foliage behind Bellaby, near a stunted palm with bark textured like a pine cone and fronds like a common fern's. Luis, back in search of something, I thought, but he never appeared.

"You haven't kept in touch with her?"

"Why on earth would I, Mr. Keane?" She was struck—almost literally—by an idea. "You're not that awful woman's child?"

It was a leap worthy of an amateur detective. I was about the right age, by an odd coincidence. But I never seriously considered donning the disguise. I was satisfied to have learned that Bellaby didn't even know the sex of Lisk's love child.

"I'm a friend of your brother's, remember? But I did speak to Eva Lisk earlier today. She lives about twenty miles from here as the crow flies. She told me your brother sent himself to prison."

"Ridiculous," Bellaby said. "She turned him in. Everybody knew that."

"Everybody thought that. But there were two calls to the police. One tipping them to the embezzlement, one naming Skiles. Each one anonymous. Each one from a woman. The same woman, everyone assumed. I think it was two different women. Lisk made the first call, but she didn't name any names. When she heard later that your brother had taken the fall, she assumed he'd done it voluntarily. But he'd been pushed.

"You made the second call, Joan. You knew your husband was looking at ruin—you were looking at ruin. So you handed over your brother to save yourself."

Again a movement in the little rain forest beyond Bellaby's silver head drew my eye. And there was Skiles, standing silently behind the squat palm, watching us. I looked away quickly, but I needn't have hurried. Bellaby was staring off into space.

"You intend to tell my brother that malicious lie?" she asked, still far away.

I decided to gamble. "I already have. He laughed at the idea."

"Of course he did," Bellaby said, back with me again. "He loves

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me. I could tell him the truth myself, and it wouldn't make a bit of difference to him. He'd stay with me."

"What is the truth?"

The old woman must have decided that I posed no threat. "I couldn't give this up," she said, gesturing to the world around her with a single raised finger. "Not the smallest part of it."

I looked to Skiles for some sign that he'd heard her, but he was gone.

11.

I didn't see Skiles during my return trip to the study or in the room itself when I looked in briefly on my way to the front door. I wasn't too concerned by that. We'd established a pattern, he and I. He left me places, I found my way out, and he got there first. Sure enough, when I'd followed the front walk to the little cobblestoned parking area, Skiles was waiting for me.

He was resting against the side of my car, head bowed. "What made you ask her that?"

He'd already heard what passed for my evidence. I decided we would discuss something else. "I just tried to figure out what you'd brought me here to ask her."

Skiles looked up from the pavement. "Brought you here?"

"Maybe I should say lured me here. You knew I'd be back for my car, so you set a trap for me. You tossed your own cabin. That's why my unlocked car wasn't touched and why no really substantial damage was done. It was all just for show, with one vivid exception: the kicked-in front door. That made the rest work. But the real bait was the index card you left in the old breadbox where I'd found the Montaigne. You knew I'd open that again if I did nothing else. You weren't counting on Tim Gleason calling in the cops and the cops nabbing me. You thought I'd get your background from my law firm contacts or Lisk. Either way, I'd be calling on your sister sooner or later."

Skiles had gone back to counting the cobbles. "Why would I do such a crazy thing?"

"Because you knew your sister wanted you back here and you weren't sure you wanted to stay with her. You've always secretly suspected that she was the one who turned you in to the police. You wanted to know for sure. You wanted an out."

"You think I have one now?"

I noticed that he'd lost his paisley tie. "You know you do," I said. "You don't owe your sister any more sacrifices."

"I'm not sure I agree with you, Owen. I think I may have hurt Joan worse than she ever hurt me. Ruined her life, maybe."

"How?"

"By taking the blame for her husband's sins and leaving her to

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live out her empty days. Who knows how she might have responded, how she might have changed if all this had been yanked from under her.

"That was the turning point for me: the day I lost everything. That's when I really started to live. Sure I saw prison as a noble sacrifice, but I knew even then—down-deep knew—that it was also my escape. Eva Lisk had given me a way out of a life I hated, or so I thought. It was really Joan who did it. I owe her for that."

"So send her a check every month like you've been doing for Lisk."

"Figured that out, too, have you?"

"Why did you use your sister's name?"

"So Eva would take the money. She hated Jim Skiles. Joan Bellaby was just a name to her. Eva was in a bad spot, a woman raising a kid alone back in the fifties. Alex gave me some money when I was paroled. Conscience money. I didn't need it myself, so I put it to good use. Had a friend here in Philly keep tabs on her and her baby. Did you happen to see a picture of Eva's daughter when you were by there? Vera?"

"No," I said.

He stood up and brushed at the fender of the Ghia, though his suit pants had gotten the worst of the exchange. "Too bad. I've always wanted to know what she looked like, whether she was happy. Thought you might have noticed a picture. You're a noticing kind of man."

"Is that why you picked me for this?"

He laughed his old cackly laugh. "You were more or less born for the job, Owen. Remember what I said about you back at the cabin? You'd disbelieve nine stories out of ten. That's what I needed, a doubter, a questioner.

"Besides, you'd gotten me into this mess in the first place, by inspiring me to call Joan. Only right you should get me out again. Be honest. You crossed the Delaware to rescue me, didn't you? Well, you did it. You saved me, and I thank you for it."

"So you're going back to the Pines?"

"If the Pineys will have me. The truth about me will have gotten around pretty generally by now. I can thank the sheriff and Tim Gleason for that."

"And me," I said.

"Still, that could be for the best. I was Gimbel and Bellaby's man once. After that I was the property of the state of Pennsylvania. Then for a long time I was a story I'd made up. Now maybe I can just be me. Maybe. 'The greatest thing in the world is to know how to belong to oneself.' Our old friend Montaigne said that. Something for you to remember, Owen." He held out his hand.

"I'll try," I said. ●

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Art by Mark Evans

THE SECOND CRIME AROUND

by Donald Olson

From the porch of the Balmoral Inn where Rosamund Niles waited for her husband she could see across the street to the Village Hall where a dance was being held. Occasionally the doors would open and groups of young people would sweep across the street on gales of laughter into the taproom of the inn.

Be happy, my dears, whispered Rosamund, lifting her gaze to the fading rose-colored sky, rose-colored as her own mood, for she was happier than she'd been in weeks. She and Bernard had come here ten years ago following their wedding and it had been Bernard's suggestion, much to Rosamund's surprise, that they spend a second honeymoon at the same place. Had he realized, she wondered, that a certain staleness had come into their marriage and that revisiting the scene of that happy fortnight might help them recapture what was in danger of being lost?

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Rosamund recalled the woodland walks, golf and tennis, canoeing on the river, candlelight dinners, and love-making until dawn. They would enjoy it all again and return to the city with a sense of marriage vows renewed.

Now Bernard joined her, having taken his shower and dressed for dinner. The years had been kind to him, kinder, Rosamund had to admit, than they'd been to her. No gray in *his* hair, and still with the body of an athlete. Bernard was a gynecologist with an active practice in the city.

He brushed a hand across her cheek, stooped to kiss her. "Table's ready, darling. Hungry?"

"Ravenous." They'd spent all day out of doors.

The lights in the Victorian dining room were kind to her, shading the lines around her blue-gray eyes, hiding the strands of gray in her sparrow-colored hair.

The other diners were much like themselves, mature, affluent-looking couples, quiet, self-absorbed. Only from the adjoining taproom came sounds of high-spirited laughter.

Rosamund regarded her husband across the table with eyes quite as adoring as a bride's. His own smile was as affectionate, if faintly amused by her sudden outburst of enthusiasm.

"Thank you, darling. Thank you, thank you, thank you! For all this. I'd begun to fear lately that I was somehow, I don't know, letting you down."

"Rubbish. If anyone's been remiss it's me. The practice has taken too much of my time, made me selfish, inconsiderate."

She denied this, of course, even while recognizing an element of truth in it.

Sometime during the meal Rosamund became aware of a solitary diner at a corner table, a thickly fleshed, heavily jowled man with features, especially the deep-set, dark-circled eyes, that reminded Rosamund of a benevolent rhinoceros. He couldn't have been much older than Bernard, but what a difference. A sense of her own good fortune overwhelmed her.

They dawdled over dessert and brandies. Rosamund yawned. "Sorry, love. Rich food and country air. I'm ready for bed and a book. How about you?"

"Maybe a pipe first, then I'll come up."

Last year you selected a Donald Olson story, "Don't Go Upstairs," for third place in the 2000 Readers Award. Since then, the story has also been nominated for the Bouchercon Convention's Anthony Award. The winner of the Anthony is to be announced on November third, just after this issue goes to press. We'll let you know the outcome in a future issue. ✝

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❖ ❖ ❖

Bernard wandered out onto the veranda, settled into the wicker chair Rosamund had occupied earlier, and lighted up his pipe. The long summer day was drifting into dusk, the daylight moon brightening, a few stars visible above the hills which in winter would be alive with skiers.

Presently his solitude was broken by the heavyset bald man who'd been dining alone. He paced back and forth a few times before speaking. "Grand evening."

"Perfect," Bernard agreed.

"Been here long? At the inn, I mean."

"Our second day. We're here for a week."

"Charming old place." He offered his hand. "George Rulifson."

"Bernard Niles."

"Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all. Fellow guest, are you?"

"No, I've a house up on the Ridge. Chalet, sort of. Rent it out in the winter for a packet. I don't ski."

Bernard said he didn't, either. "I run. Marvelous paved jogging trail from up at the lodge down along the river. Makes a change from the city streets."

"Keeps you fit, obviously. Believe me, I wasn't always in *this* shape. God, what the years do to you." He twisted around in his chair, studied Bernard's profile. "We haven't met before, have we?"

Bernard returned his scrutiny. "I don't think so. I never forget a face. My wife and I were here before, ten years ago. On our honeymoon."

"Ah, so you're enjoying a second honeymoon. Now that's romantic."

"My wife's idea." Bernard didn't know why he lied, unless confessing to a romantic whim might impugn his manhood. "She'll be wondering what happened to me. Nice talking to you."

"Same here." He looked up at Bernard with a coy look, as if teasing him. "You quite sure we've never met?"

"If we have, it'll come back to me. But I can't imagine where it would have been."

Rosamund was in bed reading her book. Jane Austen's *Emma*. Bernard started to get undressed. "I was chatting to that big fellow we saw in the dining room. Said he thought I looked familiar."

Rosamund put a marker in her book, set it aside. "Not a doctor, too, is he?"

"I don't think so."

"He's not someone you'd easily forget."

Except for a couple of the staff, no one was stirring when Bernard left the inn next morning for his run. He encountered no one as he

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jogged along the side of the road and as far as the ski lodge, behind which a trail followed the winding course of the river. The tang of pines, the bright blue sky, birdsong the only sound, filled Bernard with a sense of youthful vigor.

He stopped at a lookout point where there was a picnic table and a telephone. He rested briefly, preparing what he would say before making his call.

The sound of her voice, husky with sleep, excited him. "It's me," he said.

"About time. Everything okay?"

"Of course."

"Have you told her?"

"Well, no, not yet."

"Why not? How long does it take to tell the poor cow you want a divorce?"

"Look, sweetheart," he said, "we've been patient this long. Another few hours won't make any difference."

"I miss you."

"I miss you. I'll call tomorrow."

They exchanged kissing sounds. He hung up.

Invigorated by his run and stimulated by that brief exchange with his paramour, Bernard was ready for his shower, his appetite for breakfast unusually keen. He liked to think of Jane as his paramour, the word suggesting to his mind a creature more voluptuous, more exotic, than the term mistress. After peeling off his running togs, showering, and donning that cloak of deception he'd worn around Rosamund for several months now, Bernard stood over his wife's sleeping figure. Her face in repose, bare of makeup, aroused in him a sharp sense of resentment bordering on contempt.

Divorce. Could Jane truly be that naive? Hadn't he told her enough about Rosamund to realize how totally impractical that would be, even if Rosamund should comply with his demands, which, of course, she wouldn't? But then Jane knew as little about his circumstances as did Rosamund. The practice was not all that lucrative and without his wife's personal fortune Bernard's lifestyle would be drastically and demeaningly altered. This he could not face.

The marriage must end, but not by that means. He'd made up his mind to that weeks ago. It was that determination and not any romantic foolishness that had inspired the second honeymoon idea. No, Rosamund must die, there was no alternative. Not brutally, not savagely, but as the result of a tragic accident. The scenario was clear in Bernard's mind, as if he'd written the script and rehearsed the action many times.

As they'd done on their honeymoon ten years ago, they would rent a canoe and follow the river's course almost as far as the dam, where the water ran swiftly beneath a canopy of overhang-

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ing willows. He would pretend to be changing places with Rosamund, would capsize the canoe, would struggle as if to save her, but of course would fail. No one could prove it was not an accident. There would be no witnesses. The staff at the inn and the other guests would be able to testify that no husband could be demonstrably more loving and considerate to his wife. Bernard had made sure to create that impression.

"Another round of golf and lunch by the pool today? How's that sound darling?"

"Lovely. And I'd like to browse around those two antique shops in the village; maybe find something for Marian and Bill."

"Good idea. And tomorrow we'll paddle a canoe down the river. Remember what fun it was the first time?"

And so, with another crisp and sunny day in the offing, they enjoyed a leisurely breakfast before heading for the golf course at the lodge.

Bored with the prospect of dawdling about antique shops, Bernard was glad when Rosamund seemed only too happy to let him beg off.

One might have thought Bernard would be wholly preoccupied with visions of what was to happen the following day on the river, but with that psychopathic twist to his mind he had developed the faculty of blinding himself to reality when necessary, of creating in his mind a vision of Rosamund's death as indeed no more than a tragic accident. Self-deception was as natural to him as deceiving others. Playing the role of grief-stricken husband would be as easy as faking the affection he no longer felt for his wife.

He decided to while away the time before Rosamund's return by having a drink or two in the taproom of the inn. The only other customer present, perched on a bar stool, was Rulifson. Bernard nodded to him and carried his drink to a table by the window.

But there was to be no escape. Rulifson presently strolled across to Bernard's table, a fulsome smile on his broad face.

"Greetings, Doc. How's it going?"

Bernard grimaced. "I don't recall telling you I was a doctor."

Rulifson nodded toward the barman. "Tommy happened to mention it."

Meaning, thought Bernard, that you must have asked him. Nosy bugger.

Rulifson pulled up a chair, patted his stomach. "My quack keeps telling me I'm a prime candidate for a stroke or heart attack. Hell, I'm too damn lazy to do anything about it."

"There's still time. Get up at the crack of dawn like me and take that five-mile run along the river. You'll soon sweat off a few pounds."

"No thanks, Doc. I don't like to sweat."

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Bernard wished Rosamund would return and rescue him. Rulifson was the type of bore he'd always tried to avoid. To his relief the man soon heaved his bulk from his chair, said something about having business in town. Bernard carried his glass back to the bar. The barman grinned. "Poor old George. He'll shoot the breeze for hours if he finds a victim."

"Lonely, maybe."

"Could be. I don't think the guy has many friends, after what happpened."

"Oh, what was that?"

"Ancient history. Rulifson had a partner in his development business. Name of Mal Fisher. They had a falling out and one night Fisher was found dead in one of the chalets they had under construction. Head bashed in. There was quite a stink. No lack of suspects, including Rulifson. Luckily he had a rock-hard alibi. He was a hundred miles away that weekend, shacked up with one of his lady friends."

Bernard grinned. "He doesn't look like a ladies' man."

"He sure don't now. But he wasn't a bad-looking dude before he put on all that weight and lost his hair."

Rosamund found him by the pool, stretched out on a chaise in his swimming trunks. She dropped down beside him with a sigh of weary contentment.

"You've been awhile," he said.

"You know me and antique shops. See what I found."

For Marian a silver inkwell to add to her collection and for Bill a piece of cloisonné, his particular passion. Bernard admired her choices before regarding her with an uncertain smile. "You look different."

"You mean you noticed?"

"Your hair."

"A whim. I stopped in this salon and had it done. Just a rinse and a set. Was it a mistake?"

"God, no. I like it."

"Does it make me look the slightest bit younger?"

"Years."

"Now don't mock me. I know I've let myself go. When we get home I want to start running again, as I used to."

"Good idea. I don't know why you stopped."

"You know what I was like for so long, after the miscarriage." Was that when things started to change between them? She couldn't be sure.

It was that hour of the day she always liked best, the stillness that seemed to envelop the world between daylight and dusk when the cooling rays of the sun cast long shadows of themselves across the

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mown grass. Only occasionally might be heard the distant ping of a gunshot from sportsmen hunting rabbits deep in the wooded hills.

Rosamund, filled with a confidence she hadn't felt in some time, took a chance on disturbing this blissful tranquillity.

"Darling," she said, "if I ask you something will you promise not to be angry?"

He turned his head lazily, watching her as she sat erect. "Try me," he said, his tone amused, not really curious.

"Your idea that we come back here, your giving me all this, it wasn't because you felt guilty, was it? It's nothing like that, is it?"

"Guilty of what?" There was the faintest edge of wariness in his voice, while his expression remained blank, eyes shut against the slanting rays of the sun.

"The craziest notions have gone through my mind lately. I even thought you might be having an affair."

He still didn't move a muscle. "Good lord, whatever put such an idea in your head?"

"Baseless intuition, I suppose. A woman thing. I know you'd never do that to me. It would destroy me."

He opened his eyes, looking at her with silent reproach before saying, "I can't believe you'd ever mistrust me. I've tried to be the best husband I know how to be. If I've failed—"

"Oh, you haven't," she cried. "No one could have been better to me, given me so much. I'm sorry I said anything. Forgive me?"

"Shall we forgive each other?"

"Then you do still love me?"

"Till death us do part."

She relaxed on the chaise with a lingering sigh. "That's all I wanted to hear."

He bent over and kissed her. His tone became brisk. "Speaking of guilt, Tommy the barman told me something that might surprise you. About Rulifson." He recounted the story he'd been told. "Who'd ever guess he'd been mixed up in something like that?"

"When did all this happen?"

"Some time ago, I guess. Tommy called it ancient history."

Rosamund thought of the man now not as a rhino but as a tragic clown, with those deep dark-circled eyes and flabby mouth. "Did they ever find out who killed his partner?"

"Apparently not."

The sun dipped below the highest hill. It was getting too cool for comfort. Rosamund picked up her purchases, Bernard wrapped a towel around his shoulders. Arm in arm they climbed the gentle slope to the inn.

In voice and manner Bernard had easily made light of Rosamund's remark about his having an affair. She'd given every

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impression of having accepted his denial, had implied not the faintest hint that she'd been prompted to speak of her fear out of some evidence she might have acquired. Such evidence couldn't exist, he was certain of that. He and Jane had been extraordinarily discreet. Still, he was glad the burden of deception would be removed within a counted number of hours. Poor Rosamund. He wished he could feel a genuine pity for her.

While they were preparing for bed Rosamund recalled to Bernard's mind an incident he'd quite forgotten, something that had happened at the end of their first visit to the Balmoral ten years ago.

"When we're ready to leave this time," she said, "*please* don't let me forget anything."

"Are you likely to?"

"My rings, remember?"

It came back to him. How they'd left the inn quite late at night and driven a good twenty miles through the hills before Rosamund discovered she'd left her rings on the washstand in the bathroom at the inn. "Don't worry. We haven't gone that far. We'll go back," Bernard had said.

Rosamund had continued to fret. Bernard assured her that their fellow guests and the Balmoral staff were not the sort to pinch a bride's engagement and wedding rings.

To help ease her mind he stopped at a couple of houses in search of a phone to call the inn. At the first house a woman had hastily informed him she didn't have a phone. The man at the next place had all but slammed the door in his face. It was not the hour of night to inspire trust in a stranger at the door.

There had been no cause to worry. The rings had been found by a maid and turned in to the inn's manager.

Now, as he got into bed, Bernard took pleasure in knowing that after tomorrow no such concerns, major or minor, need ever worry Rosamund again. He fell asleep with a smile on his face.

At dawn, after Bernard had left for his run, Rosamund had drifted back to sleep. His parting words had been, "Darling, why don't you ask them to make up a picnic lunch for us. Looks like a perfect day for our canoe trip down the river."

By the time she was up and dressed, it was already an hour past their usual breakfast time. Not for another half-hour did she begin to worry. She couldn't imagine why Bernard had not returned. She gave it another half-hour before voicing her concern to the inn's manager. Something could have happened to Bernard. An accident. A heart attack. The manager immediately sent two of the staff members out to look for Bernard.

They found him on the riverbank, under the willows, not far above the dam.

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George Rulifson arrived at the inn late that afternoon. By then the police had departed. He expressed astonishment when the barman told him what had happened.

"Poor Mrs. Niles. She was in shock. The doctor insisted she be taken to the hospital in Corydon." Beyond that, all Tommy could report was that Dr. Niles had been killed, presumably by a stray bullet from the gun of someone hunting in the hills above the river. There would be an investigation.

Rulifson took his drink out onto the veranda and sat ruminating on the tragedy.

I never forget a face, the doctor had said. Rulifson himself had recognized the doctor the first time he'd seen him in the inn's dining room as the man who'd stopped at the chalet all those years ago asking to use the phone.

No, it was a chance Rulifson had dared not take. If Niles had remembered, had said something to anyone at the inn . . .

He'd never have answered the door that dark night if he hadn't been sure it was Myra, returning after having dropped him off for his fatal meeting with Fisher, to spirit him back to the city and a foolproof alibi. Myra, who'd had good reason to provide him with that alibi.

Sad about the wife, of course. Sad about Niles as well. A charming, ideal couple, as devoted to each other as a man and wife could be. ●

"Your family tree shows you are no relation to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Mr. Holmes, and your hounds are not from the Baskervilles."

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UNDER ICE

by Patricia Rutale

A pharmacist by day, Patricia Rutale produced stories for small magazines such as *Storyteller, Spellbound,* and *Tales of the Unanticipated* before writing "Under Ice" and selling it to *EQMM* for her first paid fiction publication. Ms. Rutale lives in Guelph, Ontario. She joins a most distinguished group of Canadian authors who contribute to *EQMM.*

The night after Ryan left, Kim dreamed she was frozen. She looked down from some distance and saw herself lying flat on her back, encased in a blue-white slab. Straw hair snaked around a porcelain face with saucer eyes and gaping mouth.

She woke with a gasp, sat up, and turned on the lamp. For a moment she listened to the garage door bang in the wind like an angry poltergeist. She got up and stumbled down the hall, slapping on lights. Downstairs in the kitchen the faucet groaned and abruptly gushed. She splashed her cheeks, then filled a glass and drank. She moved her face close to the window over the sink and peered outside.

The night was clear. Through swaying columns of spruce and pine, she could see all the way to the storage shed at the back of the yard, snowdrifts sloped almost to its roof. The garage door burst out with gunshot clatter, but she'd have to go outside to shut it, out where the loudest scream would be swallowed by the wind, and the nearest neighbor was half a mile down the road.

The windowpane creaked against the wind. "You left me in the middle of a cold, dark winter," Kim whispered.

She had known about the affair, had waited for it to end in the way of the others, anticipating almost with pleasure the period of remorse and affection expected to follow. But this one had gone on for much longer, so long that the blurred outline of the Other Woman had started to take form. Bits of information stuck in

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Kim's head as if to flypaper, and a composite slowly took shape. One Sunday afternoon she picked up the phone upstairs and heard Ryan, downstairs on the kitchen extension, say the name—Tamara—in a tone that sent new nails into the meat of her heart. Kim stood still as stone, listening to a voice like velvet, amazed at the heat that could be breathed into the simplest word.

The phone rang. Kim dropped the glass into the sink and swung around. Ryan, she thought. He was sorry; he wanted to come home. She grabbed it.

"Hello?"

Someone breathed back at her.

"Who is it?" Kim said. "Who's there?"

No answer but the labored breaths, as if from some mute and wounded animal.

She hung up. She left the lights blazing and ran upstairs where she yanked the phone out of the wall, got under the covers, and pulled the nightgown tight around her knees.

Outside, the garage door banged with the mood of the wind. Downstairs the phone rang, and stopped, and started up again.

Kim curled into herself and squeezed her eyes shut. How many people, she wondered, dreamed of their deaths but then fell back into sleep and forgot everything in the morning?

Since they'd moved to Groyer Hills, five years before, Kim had worked at Perkins Pharmacy as a dispensary technician. Perkins was a bright, busy store where the shifts passed quickly, but after Ryan left, Kim didn't see how she could go in and face people. She phoned Becky Zimmer, the owner.

"Someone in my family. Yes, it's quite serious. I'm really sorry, I mean about the suddenness. No, I have no idea how long I'll be gone. I certainly don't expect you to keep the job open."

Becky Zimmer said Kim would be difficult to replace, and so maybe she'd wait awhile before even trying. Kim was, Becky claimed, so efficient, so calm, and so very easy to get along with, never losing patience with even the most obnoxious of customers. Everyone loved her.

Not quite everyone, Kim thought.

She hung up and took a Sara Lee chocolate cake out of the refrigerator. Not exactly a lie, that someone in her family was ill. She had merely neglected to add that it was herself. Groyer Hills was a small town, but Ryan had worked in Toronto, a forty-minute commute away, and Kim didn't think the news would spread for some time. She sat at the table, carefully opened the carton, and ate slowly with a fork.

Tamara, Kim knew, could never work in customer service. She was willful, belligerent, and quite likely unreliable. Her long, black

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hair hung down in sensual disorder. Her lipstick (Kim had found it most frequently on his underwear) was boldly colored and frequently smeared. There was nothing calm about Tamara, who'd never be described as well liked. Indeed, there would be people (mainly female) who despised her. Others, however, (mainly male) were so mad about her that they'd give up their entire lives to be with her.

The cake was gone as if by evaporation. Kim sat there feeling stuffed and bloated, staring at the telephone. No one knew he was gone, not even her mother, and she was out here alone.

But her parents loved Ryan like a son, the one Kim knew they'd always wished for: intelligent, successful, athletic, handsome. Ryan helped her mother clean up after family dinners. He played darts with her father, dropping stock-market tips tempered for the ultra-conservative. Ryan was—or had been, before his abrupt departure—a financial advisor for Winafor Investments.

Kim postulated that Tamara had gone to Winafor as a client. She imagined Tamara sitting across from Ryan in his private office, unbuttoning her coat with her black eyes on fire.

Daylight advanced across the table, the crumbs of cake, and Kim's pale, empty hands. Outside it was a frigid but clear January day. A good time to fix the garage door. But it wasn't banging now, and Kim felt weighted down, unequal to the smallest exertion, including that of explanation.

She reached over and unplugged the phone. No more problems with heavy-breathers. She sank back in the chair and gazed outside. It was snowing again.

As the winter progressed, the snow rose, until it would take at least four hours of hard shoveling to release her car from the garage.

It didn't matter, Kim decided. There was no place she wanted to go. Shoveling even a square foot of ground would be exhausting.

She slept a lot, in spite of the dream. She went to bed early, with all the lights on, and woke the next day at noon, feeling as if a truck had driven across her back during the night. She forced herself to get out of bed, to perform the bare maintenance—wash, brush teeth, comb hair, put on clothes. In the kitchen she Xed each day off the calendar, as if keeping score.

On Valentine's Day, around nine in the evening, there was a rapping at the back door. Kim was in the living room, lying on the sofa with a book, an award-winning story that she might finish, at her present unfocused pace, in about two years. She crept into the kitchen. It couldn't be Ryan, who had taken his key and would have burst in bearing gifts and apologies.

Maybe it was the killer. She had the dream every night now. Repetition had provided details she could have done without. Beneath the ice she was naked, limbs slightly splayed, the ample

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curves of her flesh white as marble. A scarlet crack emerged from between the part in her hair and extended into her forehead like a thin red mouth.

The rapping came again. Kim approached the door. "Who is it?"

"Gus. Brought you some wood." She crossed her arms over her chest, wishing she'd stayed quiet. "Gus, from across the road. I brought you some wood."

She turned the lock. Gus Billaud smiled, showing big yellow teeth, his complexion sallow in the shadows. "Brought you some wood, Kimmy. Nice and dry." He squeezed past her.

"You didn't have to do that. Thanks. Just drop it there."

He stepped out of his boots. "I'll take it in for you. No trouble." He walked through the kitchen into the living room. Kim stood with folded arms, watched him arrange the wood in a stack by the fireplace, taking his time. Gus lived down the road with his sixty-year-old uncle. In some town up north he apparently had two ex-wives and half a dozen kids.

Gus straightened up and wiped his hands on his coat. His face was flushed, his eyes bright. Kim wondered if he was drunk.

"I was thinking about you," Gus said, "over here all by yourself. Weather like this, you never know when the power'll go. I wouldn't want you to get cold."

"Thank you."

Kim wondered how many women got hurt simply through the practice of all those good manners drilled in from childhood? Why the devil had she let him in?

"Ryan will appreciate it." She smiled tightly. "Come to think of it, I'd better get dinner started. I didn't realize it was so late. He'll be coming in the door any minute."

Gus gazed at the front of her sweatshirt. "Coming home tonight, is he? I was wondering about that." He licked his lips. "I ain't seen his car for almost a month."

"He's been overseas. On business. He's coming home tonight, though."

"Not very smart, in my book, leaving a pretty girl all by herself."

Kim stepped back into the hallway. "Thanks for the wood, but I've really got to get dinner going."

He watched her expectantly, like something he'd caught in a trap. Kim turned and walked to the back door. She imagined herself running out into the snow, Gus chasing her. When he was done he'd take her body down to the lake at the conservation area, find a place where he could break the ice, and push her under. The dream speeded forward, ready to merge with the present like a prophecy.

Kim threw open the back door. Icy air billowed in. She held it open, stood with her back against the wall.

Gus finally came around the corner. He stepped slowly into his

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boots and walked up close, stinking of beer and body odor. "We should have a drink sometime."

"No, thank you."

Gus sighed. "That's the way you're gonna be, eh? Hard to get. You change your mind, you know where I am."

He touched her cheek with one knuckle. Kim jerked back, her head hitting the wall with an audible thump. Gus scowled and stalked out, hunched and affronted.

Kim locked the door. She checked all the windows, then pushed chairs up against the front and back doors. It took her hours to stop shaking.

March came in with blizzards and strong winds. The snow inched higher until even the garage door was wedged, and finally quiet. Overhead, the roof groaned.

The more the better, Kim thought, as long as the roof held, because who would struggle through a half-acre of high drifts to get to her now? Surely in her house of snow she was safe as a prisoner.

But the dream didn't believe she was safe.

She didn't understand. Why was she being forced to look at herself, again and again, encased in that translucent coffin? If the dream was a warning, why couldn't she see the face of her killer?

On a day near the end of March she woke late, at almost two in the afternoon. She dressed from a pile of clothes on the bedroom floor. In the kitchen she microwaved water and stirred in coffee, in what had become her typical morning. The sink brimmed with scummy water and dishes. The kitchen window was half obscured by snow.

The food was running out. After Ryan left she'd been ravenous, but now that had passed, to the extent that she wasn't particularly worried about going hungry.

She Xed the previous day from the calendar, then sat at the table with her hands cupping the warm mug. She had discovered she could spend hours staring at the patterns the frost created on the inside of the pane.

At some point there was a knock at the front door. At first she thought she'd imagined it. She peeked out from the edge of the living room window to see a tall man in a dark blue overcoat hunched against the wind. He knocked again.

It was full daylight. Kim looked him over, finding him more respectable in appearance than her comparatively grubby self. It struck her that he might be an acquaintance of Ryan's. She opened the door.

"Hello, Kim. I'm Barry." Out on the road she saw a cranberry-colored car. He had snow halfway up his pant legs. "Barry Ingram, Tamara's husband."

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Kim frowned. "Oh."

"May I come in?"

She stepped aside. He removed his boots. Snow fell on the hardwood. He looked sheepishly at Kim. She shrugged. Couldn't he see the house was a mess?

He draped his coat over the back of a chair and sat on the sofa. Kim sat at the opposite end with her hands folded in her lap.

Barry Ingram twisted his wedding ring. "I need to talk to Tamara. It's a financial matter. Have you heard anything?"

"Nothing."

"Did he say anything that night? Anything at all that might give us a clue?"

"Nothing."

They'd been through this already, on the phone, the night Ryan and Tamara had run off. In person, Barry Ingram had a peevish manner and a narrow, homely face. Kim found it surprising that a beauty like Tamara had married him—but people knowing Ryan had no doubt entertained similar thoughts upon meeting herself. She'd seen it enough times, the looks they got walking into restaurants and parties. She had easily imagined the whispers. *What's he doing with* her?

Kim cleared her throat. "Didn't Tamara say anything?" It felt strange saying the name out loud.

"Are you kidding?" He had a hectic spot of color on each cheek. "She was always making these cards on the computer. Cartoons and flowers and baby animals." He grimaced. "That's what she left me: one of her bloody cards. Said we'd drifted apart. The usual crap." He smiled coldly. "Ten years of marriage, summed up and dismissed in one paragraph of fancy font."

"I'm sorry." Ryan had at least told her in person.

"The bed was messed up," he continued, eyes febrile. "I could smell it—couldn't wait to start the honeymoon. I thought she'd been seeing him at the house, but before she'd always changed the sheets. This time she didn't bother."

Kim looked out the top of the window at a strip of cold sky. It was cruel of him to tell her. He didn't need to. But Kim already knew that Barry Ingram was not a nice guy. Why did she ever open up the door, she wondered? There was never anything but trouble on the other side. Barry Ingram pulled at his tie as if he needed air; he took it off and thrust it into his pocket.

"Tamara hasn't been using her credit cards. She hasn't tried to take anything from our account."

"Ryan had seventy-two thousand in a registered retirement plan," Kim said. "He took it all."

His mouth pinched. "You let him—"

"By the time I thought about it, the money was gone." Kim

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shrugged. "I've got the house and my car. I had some savings of my own. It works out roughly even. He didn't take more than his share."

Barry rubbed his eyes. "In other words, they could be halfway around the globe. How about credit cards—any bills coming in?"

"Nothing."

Ryan had left on the fifth day of January. Now it was March. Kim felt her heart skip at the realization. There'd be no apologies this time, no guilty outpouring of love. He wasn't coming back. She worked to steady her voice.

"We always had separate cards. He canceled all his."

They sat in silence for a moment. Then Barry Ingram said, "Look, Kim, I don't know what you've been told, but they didn't have to do it like this. Not on my account. Running off like a couple of horny teenagers." He stared hard at her. "Look, let's just come clean with each other. What did he tell you?"

"Nothing about you," she lied, looking into the eyes of a man another woman had considered homicidal. "Just that they wanted to be together."

Kim had come home from work and found two suitcases by the back door. Ryan was waiting for her, waiting in the kitchen of the house he'd chosen and insisted on, out in the country. *Don't worry, honey, you'll never be alone out here.* Ryan had been freshly showered, smelling of sandalwood, the slash of dark hair over his brow damp.

Kim was glad now that she hadn't begged, had stood silently while Ryan explained he'd fallen in love. Now Tamara's husband had found out about the affair. They had to go away because Tamara was afraid Barry Ingram would kill her.

Kim had thought it was a ploy to draw Ryan away. Now she looked at Barry Ingram and doubted Tamara less.

"I swear to you, Kim, I've never hit my wife, or harmed her in any way."

He looked away, eyes darting, coming to rest on a photograph of Kim and Ryan taken on a trip to Jamaica years ago.

Barry smiled at the picture. "You know what? You look exactly like I thought you would."

That was nice. She looked just like a woman whose husband would run off with someone else. It didn't surprise her. Today her T-shirt was stained, her chin broken out, sweatpants too tight. But with the food dwindling, Kim expected to lose some weight.

Barry was staring at her oddly. He winked. "So, how do I look to you?"

But Kim's mind had taken a sudden detour. "What's she like?" she asked him. "Tamara, I mean."

Barry looked surprised, then introspective. He squinted. "Tam? She's nuts. Crazy, actually—I mean even more than most women."

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He smiled unpleasantly, and it occurred to Kim that Barry Ingram was a man who saw women as basically interchangeable. That if he wanted to hurt Tamara, who was now out of reach, Kim might do almost as well.

"Into one thing one day," he continued, "something else the next. Exciting. That's the trouble with girls like Tam. You get addicted to the rush, and then—"

"Do you have a picture?" Kim interrupted, wondering at this urge to rub salt into her own wounds. "A wedding photograph or something, in your wallet?"

Barry shook his head, his smile twisted. "I put that in the shredder years ago. You think your man was the first? Not even close. She started killing me slowly a long time ago."

Kim cast her eyes down. Then why had he stayed? Why had she stayed with Ryan?

"Hey, you never answered me." His tone was soft. "I asked, 'How do I look to you?' "

She stared at him, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Come on, don't be coy. I mean, Kim, look at our situation here. We're the injured parties, to put it mildly." He glanced out the window. "What we've got is the perfect excuse to offer each other some solace."

Then it happened very quickly. His hip was suddenly crushed against hers. A hard arm compressed her shoulders.

"No! Stop it!"

He pushed her down, his weight pinning her. "They've got it coming to them."

"Get off me!"

She punched at his arms. How could it be possible that a well-dressed businessman who was careful not to track snow into her living room now intended to rape her on her own sofa?

"Cut it out, Kim." He laughed as if she were playing. "Come on, relax." She pinched the flesh of his arms and his nostrils flared. He grabbed her wrists, yanked them over her head, and held them with one hand. "You want to get hurt, is that it?"

Kim recalled from the dream the thin red mouth. The lamp on the coffee table was out of her reach, but probably not out of his. It could certainly crack a skull. She stopped struggling and cried, tears flowing as if a bucket had been dumped over her head. He groped under her T-shirt. He reached down and unzipped his fly.

Absurdly, what filled her mind at that moment was one of the few serious arguments of her eight-year marriage. She hadn't asked for much, but she had wanted a dog. Ryan claimed a fear of dogs, said he'd been bitten as a child. Yet when confronted with dogs belonging to friends he'd shown no fear. He just didn't want a dog, Kim thought now, the way he hadn't wanted a baby, or a wife

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he had to be faithful to.

Insane to think now of the dog she never got, when she was on her way to a grave of ice. How pathetic to be on the way to death, she thought, after never really having a life. A feeling came over her that she didn't recognize at first, though she was aware that she had stopped crying.

"Okay." She made her voice soft. "Barry, you're right, they deserve it. I'm starting to enjoy it. I really am. My wrists hurt . . . please." He peered at her warily. She raised her chin and kissed him. He loosened his grip. She took back an arm and slowly moved it down.

"Oh Kim, that's more like it."

She got her hand in position, and squeezed as hard as she could. He shrieked and hit the floor with a bang. Kim ran to the fireplace and grabbed the poker. But there was no hurry, and no need, as it turned out, for the poker. He was folded on his side, twitching and moaning, hands clutching his groin.

Years ago, during a slow day at work, Kim had opened the newspaper and, in a small article tucked in the back pages, read about an elderly woman in Oregon who'd woken to find a naked man straddling her. The grandmother of ten, who obviously knew a few things about the male anatomy, had taken matters immediately into her own hands. Kim had never forgotten the story, and now maybe it had saved her life.

From inside the Groyer Hills police station that night, Kim heard the rain start. It was almost midnight when she was driven home and escorted to her door by a policewoman who had a few things to say about the state of her driveway. Barry Ingram remained in the hospital.

It was her word against his, of course. He was threatening assault charges if she didn't drop her charges. But for some reason even the idea of an embarrassing court case failed to rattle her now.

Kim ate a dozen stale crackers and a slightly moldy piece of cheese. She sat at the kitchen table and looked at her hand; clenched and unclenched her fingers while outside the rain beat down. The air had warmed. Shelves of snow periodically slid down the slope of the roof and crashed to the ground. Spring was on its way. Nothing could stop it. Down at the lake the ice would melt from below and be washed away from the surface. Eventually it would be gone.

Kim turned out all the lights before going to bed.

But the dream came again. It would seem her death was still held firmly in the landscape of the future, not diverted after all by the acts of the day. Yet when dawn came, she woke with a fear that had somehow become manageable.

Outside, the world glistened as if dipped in glass. Ice was everywhere, but the sun was out. When she put a shovel to the crust

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she found the snow beneath soft. In less than three hours she'd cleared a lane to the road. She started her car, backed it out of the garage, and looked things over: half a tank, the motor groggy but strong.

In downtown Groyer Hills it was a quiet afternoon. Kim went briskly up and down the aisles of the IGA, selecting apples, vegetables, tuna, soup, skim milk, whole-wheat bread. She looked at a carton of chocolate ice cream, then put it back and selected a smaller one. She helped the cashier lift bags into her cart.

"Kim, hi!" She looked up. It was Sherry Atwater. Her husband had played softball with Ryan last summer. "How are you?"

"Okay," Kim said carefully. "How about you?"

"I'm great. How's Ryan? Soon it'll be ball time again." Sherry was short and plump with a messy red-brown bun. She smiled, standing there with a cart, all happily married.

Kim hesitated. "Ryan's left town. We've separated."

Sherry's mouth fell. "Oh, my gosh! I'm so sorry."

After that it wasn't so bad. That first statement was hardest, like breaking a tight seal. When Sherry followed her into the parking lot with questions, it became easier. *Actually, things hadn't been good for a while. He met someone else. Yes, I think I'll be staying. I've been off work. I was going to call Becky today. Sure, you can tell people he's gone. It's not a secret.*

At home, Kim put away groceries and started to clean. At midnight she finished, showered, ate a tuna sandwich, and fell into a clean bed with acne cream smeared on her chin. In the week that followed she put everything Ryan had left into garbage bags, loaded the car, and went to the Salvation Army. If he showed up and wanted his things, well, that was tough. She cleaned out the closets and the cupboards, and washed all the windows. She packed photographs and other reminders of her marriage into boxes, sealed, labeled, and piled in the darkest corner of the basement. She went through the tools that were now all hers, organizing.

One morning she sat down by the phone, took a few deep breaths, and called her parents.

Flabbergasted, first by her mother's lack of surprise, and then by her unquestioning support, Kim said, "But you loved Ryan."

"*You* loved him," her mother replied, in the tone of a gentle correction.

Her father got on the other line. "You want to come back home?"

"No, Dad. I'm thirty-three years old. But it means a lot that I could."

Later that afternoon she fixed the lock on the garage door. Afterwards she walked out into the yard and stood staring up at the house.

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It was a nice house. All it really needed was a new roof and a paint job. She turned and scanned the lot all the way back to the shed, the clusters of evergreens. Running around those trees, a dog would be in heaven. Suddenly she knew she was going to stay in the house.

She walked back, locked up the garage, and almost ran into Gus Billaud coming around the corner.

"Hey, Kimmy. I see you got your drive cleared. You should've called me to help." He was wearing a new lumberjack shirt under his coat and reeked of cheap cologne. He held up a six-pack of Budweiser. "Thought you'd like some company on a Friday night."

"I don't need any help, Gus," Kim said. "I don't need any company, either. In fact, I don't want you coming around here at all."

Gus stared at her. "What's the matter with you?"

"I've had a very rough winter. But it's almost over." She looked at him. "Gus, if you come over here again, unless your house is on fire, I'm going to call the police."

He walked off muttering. *I don't care,* Kim thought. *It isn't him, but I don't care. No more crap.*

Under ice, blue eyes fade to gray and surfaces recede. The angles of face and flesh look stark and exaggerated, like a three-dimensional work of animation. A human body, even in a block not much bigger than its form, is completely cut off and lost to the external world.

Kim levitated. In the way of dreams, it was at times difficult to focus, though she was close enough to reach out and touch the ice. She lingered deliberately, hoping he would make an appearance, but no. She remained alone with her iced corpse, the killer apparently long flown.

Then where am I, Kim thought? Where, exactly, have I been disposed of? She had always assumed the site to be the lake at the conservation area. It occurred to her now that the place in this dream lacked the feel of an open plane.

She tried to move slowly, taking care not to dissolve the dream. She cranked her head to the right, where she glimpsed a dark wall that instantly blurred.

Then an idea came to her, and she willed her body to rise. But as she rose she picked up speed, unable to slow the velocity. The slab below rapidly diminished, then was gone. In its place was a roof, also growing smaller by the second. Kim continued upward, staring down, glimpsing the landscape for only a few seconds before waking.

But it was enough.

The next morning the thaw had begun in earnest; the gurgle and trickle of water was everywhere. She took a snow shovel, a spade,

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and the toolbox, and made her way to the back of the yard.

The shed had thin walls and a leaky roof. They'd used it to store junk until it could be taken to the dump. She shoveled away wet snow and wrenched open the double doors. The windowless space was cold and damp, with a musty odor of rodents and rotting wood. Slivers of light came through cracks between the boards. Kim looked around, chilled with certainty. This was the place. Perhaps she couldn't stop her own death, but she could certainly dismantle her grave site.

She started by removing the doors, letting each panel drop into the slush. She carried out a dehumidifier, an armchair, an old desk Ryan had used as a boy, four shovels, two rakes, and a hoe. She looked twice at a heavy coil of garden hose, which usually would be in the garage, before throwing it out with the rest.

She paused and stared at the floor. It made sense to take the roof and walls down first, but something compelled her to start on the floor. She reached down, and with the curved end of the hammer wrenched up a board. Underneath was the frame, a hollow space of about a foot, and then the dirt. She pulled up the next board, and the next, throwing them out onto the snow, wiping sweat from her face with the sleeve of her coat.

Then she uncovered a long vertical plank, set sideways, and six inches of ice. It looked like the start of a skating rink. She pulled faster, board after board, hands shaking.

When she was done she stood looking down, breathing raggedly.

Tamara Ingram was not, after all, tall or dark or slender. Kim was confronted with the opposite of everything she had imagined: fair hair, wide hips, a milk-white face, eyes startlingly similar to her own that stared at Kim as if with reproach: *What took you so long?*

Soon Kim would turn and run to the house. Within the hour the driveway would fill with cars and police would swarm the property. In a month, Ryan would be picked up in Texas, telling his story of a lovers' quarrel, a push in a wet bathroom that he naturally regretted. His shock when Tamara's head had hit the toilet bowl. His grief and half-mad state when he'd laid her in the space beneath the shed, and, fearful that she'd be pulled out and revealed by wildlife, flooded the space to freeze her in. Women, moved by his story and his photograph in the newspapers, would write to him in prison. But he'd get no response from his letters to his wife, who would divorce him before the snow fell again.

But now, in the seconds after Kim uncovered Tamara Ingram's body, she could only stare, horrified and transfixed. Because the woman under ice was beautiful, and at least in life she had known it. ●

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Alternating Currents

by Barry Baldwin

I'd never been to a class reunion before that one, and I won't be going to another.

The whole idea had always seemed a bit stupid to me. After all, it was only the local comprehensive. Hardly your Eton or your Harrow.

I'd not kept in touch since leaving. Binned the newsletters that came for the first couple of years without so much as a glance. Definitely nobody that I wanted to clap eyes on again. Never gave them a thought.

Except two. There was Janie Wilson, with whom I'd tried to have an experience behind the bike shed. All I managed was one nicotiney kiss and a nervous fumble at her jumper, not remotely near the knicker-elastic frontier, before she saw me off with a well-aimed knee in the you-know-whats and some choice parting language. I did wonder what had happened to her. Usually when I'd come home birdless from pub or club.

A retired professor of classics with 12 published books in the field, Barry Baldwin made his fiction debut in our Department of First Stories in 1998. A number of his stories have seen print since, and with considerable success: His first story for *EQMM*, "Do You Take This Man?" received a nomination for Canada's Arthur Ellis Award, and a story published in *AHMM* in 1999, "A Bit of a Treat," was nominated for that year's Anthony Award. ¶

And there was no way I could avoid Nigel Longbottom. I know, I know, some say Good Old Nigel. . . . But you had to feel sorry for any poor sod called that. Not the best monicker to be lumbered with at a comprehensive. I don't need to spell out all the nicknames—Short Arse was obviously the favourite.

As one of four Darrens in the class, I was on safe ground there. Being a bit on the podgy side, I did get the occasional fat joke, though more from the teachers when I knocked the buck horse over in P.E. or wheezed down the football field. Generally speaking, though, I was ignored, which in its way is a form of bullying if you think about it, which I did. I actually came to resent him for

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the way he was picked out, so made a point of him seeing me in the ranks of the anti-Short Arse movement.

We never worked out what he was doing in a school like ours, Nigel Longbottom, with his different accent and winter suntan and sometimes even reading books the teachers hadn't told us to. No one fancied taking this up with him directly; he was bigger and stronger than the rest, so was slagged off in group mutterings at a safe distance.

Mind you, it didn't seem to bother him. He never made any overtures to anyone that I saw. Janie Wilson swore he once asked her to go for a burger with him and that she'd told him to get lost. I was glad to believe I wasn't the only one who'd had the elbow from Janie Wilson, though, to be honest, I thought she might only have said this to impress Shane Mole, who knew where to get hold of all the best pills for Saturday night raves, not that I ever got a look in there.

Of course, I know now how he came to be at our school. I ought to; it's been in the papers often enough. Turned out he had these well-off parents who didn't believe in the sort of education they'd had themselves, so they made him go to what they called a real school. They were both in politics, know what I mean?

He'd put all those muscles to good use. Gone in for boxing. An Olympic Gold, then turned pro. One of the few British heavyweights whose jaw wasn't made of glass. Slugged his way right up to a World Title bout which he lost on points to Rocky Moroni, but even the Americans admitted it should have gone the other way.

The last thing I'd read, he was retiring. Couldn't blame him for that, getting out while he was still on top, with his millions and his looks, and hadn't begun to stammer and shake like Muhammad Ali. He'd been easing his way into what they call other interests for quite a while: a column in one of the top tabloids, guest appearances as the heavy on TV crime shows, that sort of thing.

Almost the only thing he hadn't become famous for was women. No pictures of him being grappled by Page Three girls or any other kind. And before you get the wrong idea, no whispers about rent-boys, either. Maybe he was one of those old-fashioned types who stick to the idea that bedrooms and boxing rings don't mix. Or maybe it was all down to Janie Wilson, one way or another.

These maunderings were what made me decide to turn up at the reunion. Plus the fact that I was too skint to go to the pub, there was nothing worth watching on the box, and if I'd had a social diary it would have been as empty as per usual. Guys with those personal organisers and what-not bang on about finding a window; I had a whole greenhouse of opportunities.

The invite had come by second-class post, which said something. They must have got my address off the electoral roll; I'd, on pur-

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pose, not sent my new one when I moved out from home. Whoever had been given the job of writing it had done their best to talk up the evening, hinting vaguely at something special. I reckoned that was just a way of getting a few more bums on seats.

I didn't exactly arrive in my work clothes, but I wasn't dressed up much for it, either. I deliberately parked my van next to the one flash car there, a red Jaguar. I suppose I was trying to make a point, but don't ask me what. It was a shivery sort of night and I didn't hang around drinking in the atmosphere of The Old School, though I did stop and think a thought or two by the bike shed. By the time I'd got inside and clattered down the corridors to our old classroom, I was already wishing I hadn't come.

The desks had been pushed and piled along the walls (which were crying out for a coat of paint) to make room for a lineup of trestle tables at each end of which a tea and coffee urn served as goalposts to the teams of already curling sandwiches and dusty-looking sausage rolls on cardboard plates. To be fair, though, there was a big chocolate cake in the middle on which I promptly set my sights.

No booze. Still a shock, though I knew it would be like that because there'd been some rubbish in the local rag about alcohol being banned from all functions on school premises on the grounds that it set a bad example for the pupils. If only they knew.

Cold as well; the heating was turned off according to the calendar, not the weather. And since there was no way the caretaker was going to stir on the weekend, there was a menacing appeal chalked on the blackboard about people being expected to stay behind and help clean up at the end. I knew one pair of deaf ears that was going to fall on.

It wasn't a big turnout. Some people were talking at, if not to, each other, but a fair number stood around by themselves, juggling cups and plates and no doubt wondering what they were doing here on a Saturday night. When I came in, they all gave me the quick once-over before looking as though they hadn't looked at me in the first place.

Most of them, like me, hadn't bothered to pick up and fill out their ID tags. I managed to put a few names to faces, but couldn't work out a likely match with that red Jag. Unless by any chance it belonged to Janie Wilson. No problem recognising her. She looked very dated, though, like something out of *Dallas*.

I got close enough to her group to give her the chance to acknowledge my existence. She did a pretty good job of blanking me. No ring on the wedding finger—I couldn't stop myself from checking—not that that means much these days. I'm no Sigmund F, but everything about her looked and sounded distinctly iffy.

Some anoraky-looking woman, apparently the nearest thing

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there was to an organiser, shouted for hush, and when she'd got it, which took awhile, yakked on about how great it was et cetera, then kicked her voice down a few notches and took her time asking for a minute's silence in memory of a classmate who she'd just that afternoon found out had died suddenly. This turned out to be Shane Mole. He got his minute, though it wasn't all that quiet. I spent it less on him than on what might have happened to him: "Died suddenly" can mean a lot of things.

With Shane Mole done and dusted, the noise level went back up. As I was wondering whether to risk saying anything to Janie Wilson or simply grab my share of that chocolate cake and clear out, the door opened and in came what was obviously the something special hinted at on the invite: Short Arse himself, Nigel Longbottom.

Well, that solved the red Jag. But what the hell was he doing here? Why, when he could be wherever in the world he wanted, would he choose to come back to this down-market bunch of people he must have hated at school and surely had ignored since leaving as completely as I had?

To gloat over the peons, presumably. All right, he was entitled to that, I grant you. But it was all very stagey. Where had they been hiding him before his grand appearance? In the school bogs? This time, the anorak person had no trouble getting some hush. While Nigel pretended to study his feet, as big and good-looking as in his pictures, I was disappointed to see, Anorak informed us in a parson's tone of voice that now that he was retiring from the ring our hero had decided to come back and live in his native city, but had kept this a secret until now since he wanted his old schoolmates to be the first to know.

Old schoolmates? This was rewriting history with a vengeance. Obviously, the idol of British boxing would like to plug-hole memories of a time when he was on the receiving end of the punishment. I was impressed at the way he kept a straight face as he acknowledged with a fist that already at school could have laid any of us out some ragged applause in which I didn't join. Just like the old days, people still being verbal at a distance, looking as much at each other as at him.

Steely Dan, why didn't I listen to you? "And I'm never going back to my old school." It was definitely time to be out of there. I decided to bypass the chocolate cake, not quite having the nerve to be the first one at it, and made for the door. But with the timing that went with his golden punches in the ring, he spotted me just as I had my hand on the knob.

"Not so fast, Darren."

He'd recognised me. I'd have bolted, except you can't do that with a body like mine.

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I made my "Nigel?" sound more like a question than an answer, milking the name of all its class-war potential.

"Can we have a word?"

I didn't fancy one. "Can we have a word" is an invitation-cum-command that tends to bring bad news. I managed to summon up enough something-or-other to stand there and make him come over to me rather than me to him. Anorak looked radiant, as though she expected we were going to fall all over each other in tears like they do on *This Is Your Life*. I'd sussed Anorak out by now; she'd been one of the activists in the anti-Short Arse campaign.

Without making any fuss about it, Nigel got himself between me and the door. Only a few people had the manners to pretend to carry on talking to each other. I was near enough to Janie Wilson to see she was wetting herself for something to happen.

She was going to be disappointed. I didn't get decked. At least, not physically. And she wouldn't have seen me go down, anyway. Nigel pulled the door open, nodded at me to go through, and towered over me in the corridor. We stood closer to each other than we'd ever done at school. I caught from his breath the whiff of something a bit stronger than tea or coffee, lucky sod.

"So, tell me, Darren, what little corner of the ring of life have you ended up in, then?"

I pretended not to understand.

"What do you do to earn a crust?"

I told him.

"Really? Well, there's always a demand for that, isn't there? Might give you a call myself if I ever need one."

I didn't say anything. A good policy when you've nothing to say.

"I noticed back in there, Darren, you were the only one that didn't give me a clap. Not that the others exactly went overboard. You know, Darren, back at school I despised you more than anyone else. That pasty face and fat belly. Haven't improved in those departments, have you? Lumbering about, joining in the Short Arse choir when it was safe. Not like that Shane Mole. They say he's had his head kicked in, got what he deserved, but at least he was up-front about organising you lot against me. I could respect him for that. You know, Darren, back at school when the mob was going on at me, you were the one I used to focus my disgust on to stay sane. And in the ring, every time I was poised to flatten somebody, I would substitute your face for his, especially when I thought about you and Janie Wilson."

I felt like Mr. Jones in that Bob Dylan song: I knew something was happening but not what.

"I know that you know she gave me the brush-off at school. But that doesn't explain her going with you. You, Darren, of all people.

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Threw it in my face about teaching you the facts of life behind the bike shed."

I didn't try to straighten him out. He'd not have believed me, he'd just think I was trying to get out of a spanking from him. Anyway, it was something if he believed I was one up on him in any respect, let alone that. Shane Mole must have told Janie Wilson to say that to him to twist the knife.

"You know, Darren, when I saw you in there, my inclination was to take you out behind the bike shed and show you why I was boxing champion. But then everyone would have felt sorry for you, we'd have had dear Janie kissing you better and all that. Better to let you fester on. Just think, Darren, I'm going to be living very comfortably out there at The Grange and you're going to know that every waking moment in whatever miserable little hole you squat in. Though I do wonder how much longer you'll be with us, Darren, with that gut and all the crap you feed it with. I saw the way you were eyeing that cake."

I thought of dredging up a line I remembered from one of those alternative comedians—it might have been Jo Brand—about health being bad for you. I might have been better employed working up a sob story that he'd got it wrong, that I'd had to go along with the rest to take the pressure off myself, and that Janie Wilson and I were both in the same boat when it came to Shane Mole. Probably not, though. Nigel wasn't here to listen. Anyway, what he signed off with before telling me to sod off and going back into the classroom to say God knows what to the others left me too gobsmacked to come out with anything.

As I tossed and turned in my pit all that night, I kept telling myself that it had been the drink talking, even though everything else he'd said had been dead cold sober.

The phone call came a couple of months later. I was at a loose end, too skint again to go down the pub, not doing myself any good by humming that Sam Cooke tune "Another Saturday Night and I Ain't Got Nobody," and thinking I'd even welcome a bell from a double-glazing salesman.

"Darren? Got a job for you."

I spluttered something about it being the weekend.

"I know what night it is, Darren. You're obviously not doing anything, and from the way you picked up that phone I don't imagine you've got anything in mind. So, get yourself out here ASAP. You know where my place is, I suppose?"

I managed something sarky about who doesn't?

"Same old Darren. Why should he have that when I've only got this? If I hadn't bought it, some company would have turned it into a hotel or what have you. I'll see you here. It'll be worth your while, I promise you."

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An hour later, I was scattering the gravel as I pulled up more sharply than I needed outside the front of his stately pile. The Grange was everything you'd expect a place called The Grange to be. Straight out of *Country Life.* It just needed a labrador in the backseat of the shooting brake parked next to the red Jag.

He was outside on the steps doing some very obvious peering at his Rolex. "Took your time, didn't you? I suppose that old van is on its last legs. Come on. We haven't a lot of time."

I took my bag from the back of the van and followed him in. I'll spare you the grand tour. Let's just say the inside was what the outside made you expect, apart from one thing.

He produced a torch from one of the flappy pockets of his hacking jacket, opened a green baize door, and shone it in. All the latest gadgets you see advertised for trimming off those unwanted pounds, or at least moving them from one part of the body to another. Must have cost a bomb. Yet they didn't seem to suit him as well as the old-fashioned punchbag which hung down at one end.

"As you can see, Darren, I've had this fitted out like a regular gym. I've no intention of running to seed now I'm out of the ring. Don't want to end up looking like you. And I've plans on the drawing board to set up a chain of gyms across the country. Got some people from London coming in later tonight to have a look. That's why you're here. You can see what's wrong. You think you can fix it?"

I made a noise that didn't mean much. If he hadn't thought I could, I wouldn't be there.

"Well, you go on and do what you have to do. I'll just show you where things are. I want it sorted in a couple of hours, mind. Have to go out and meet those guys at the airport and get them back here. You can see yourself out. Before I forget," he tugged out his wallet and pushed over a bundle of notes thick enough to make me have to struggle not to look grateful, "that should keep you in burgers for a while. Don't worry, I won't be telling the tax man. Or anyone else, come to that."

So you can take the credit, I mentally filled in.

"By the way, before I go, I'm also fetching Janie Wilson along to be met by the guys. Yes, the one and only Janie Wilson. The minute I was back in that classroom, she was all over me. You could practically hear the pound signs clicking. The upshot is, I've been seeing quite a bit of her since."

He laughed. "The cow thinks that school business is all forgiven and forgotten. She'll find out."

At the inquest on Nigel Longbottom, the coroner recorded a verdict of accidental death, adding that it was the worst case of

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botched workmanship he'd come across in all his years on the bench. People should always get work of that sort done by qualified tradesmen.

It was actually the best job of wiring I'd ever done, rigging up his gym so that the electric cables just made contact with the metal chains from which the punchbag hung. According to the witnesses, the guys from London and Janie Wilson, he'd taken them straight in there, switched on the lights that I'd fixed and reset on dim, marched over to the punchbag, and gave it one almighty thump, upon which the several hundred volts that went through his body did what a score of heavyweights around the world had failed to do: put him down for the count, in this case a permanent one.

I knew he'd do that sooner or later that night; he'd have my face swimming in front of him as he took aim at the bag. Not that anyone ever connected me with it. The Grange was stuck out in the country by itself. No neighbours to see me arrive or depart in my plain black van with the dirty number plates.

Of course, the Plod did have a "just routine, sir" word. I expected that. After all, from their point of view, it was a coincidence to put it mildly that when they went through his desk they found he'd recently made a new will leaving everything to me.

I couldn't explain it. Well, I could, but naturally I didn't. I'd known about it ever since that parting shot of his at the school. He was so confident he'd outlive me that he was going to make me his beneficiary. Just a not-very-funny joke, had to be, the drink talking. When the copy of the will turned up in the post, I still thought it was some sort of wind-up. Until I put my mind to it and worked out that it was genuine but he reckoned I'd never have the guts to do anything about it so I'd spend the rest of my life tormented by all that loot I was so near to and so far from.

He'd have been right, as well, until reports started appearing in the paper about more of our old class getting themselves killed: two knocked down by a hit-and-run merchant, one in the canal. Just a funny run of coincidences, had to be, the sort you see in those Amazing Phenomena magazines. I was glad they hadn't happened before the reunion, otherwise Anorak would have had us there half the night remembering the victims.

Well, actually, she wouldn't. When they put the picture of the one from the canal in the paper, it was quite a good likeness of Anorak herself.

What occurred to me, after I saw that, was: How did he know Shane Mole had been beaten to death? Anorak had given no details, and when it got a paragraph in the paper, there was just some vague stuff about suspicious circumstances.

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Two and two don't always make four. I'll never be certain. But I do know that since Nigel went, no one else has.

I'd like to know what the Plod's thinking is. They've never been back. The odds are, they'll leave it be. Nobody's shedding tears over Shane Mole and they've got their verdicts in and their paperwork done for the others.

I've no shortage of friends these days. And a much better place to live. Not The Grange, though. I unloaded that for a packet. It's going to be made over into a health farm. With his name on it. Those guys from London, I expect.

So what's giving me bad nights and stomachaches so chronic that I'm starting to feel Nigel was right in predicting mine would be a short life span?

It's her. Oh yes, I've acquired a wife as well. Janie Wilson was on the phone before he'd gone cold in his grave, and one thing led to another.

Of course, I've no illusions. She's counting on putting up with me for a couple of years, then there'll be some excuse for leaving and fancy lawyers on the scene and you know what next.

There's one thing, though.

The cow thinks that school business is all forgiven and forgotten. She'll find out. ●

By Book or By Crook

by Gene Fehler

One quiet night I took a look
Inside a tense detective book
And saw a prowler crouched inside.
He couldn't hide, although he tried,
So then he spun, pulled out a gun,
Shot wildly and began to run.
I turned the pages, kept in sight
The prowler in his frantic flight.
I wasn't scared, I read it all,
And saw the prowler trip and fall.
The policemen caught him, he was jailed.
I'm glad to say that right prevailed.
That prowler now is doing time
In prison somewhere for his crime.
I like to believe I had a say
In helping put that thief away,
So I will keep on reading books
And help to capture all those crooks.

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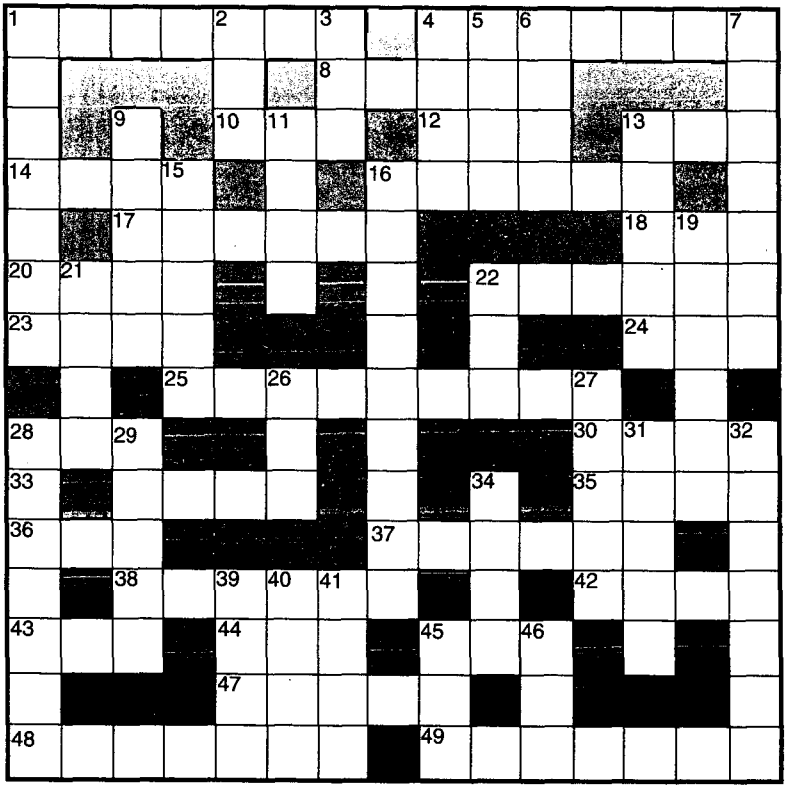
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

From the Holmes Canon

by Robert Kesling



Solution on page 106

ACROSS

1. "A Scandal in _____"
4. "The _____ Man"
8. Wise Greek lawgiver
10. Brief siesta
12. Flightless bird
13. Forbid
14. Makes pigeon sounds
16. With 1 down, the adventure in which Violet Hunter has a unique request from her employer
17. Philippine city

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18. "The Greatest" (he claimed)
20. Referring to a time period
22. "The Lauriston _____ Mystery"
23. African title of respect
24. Droop
25. "The Adventure of the Retired _____"
28. Decompose
30. Awry, to one side
33. Worn away
35. Not nice after meals, especially in polite company
36. Paper acknowledging indebtedness
37. "The Red-headed _____"
38. "The Adventure of the Abbey _____"
42. Fast trans-Atlantic flyers
43. What's left after the fire
44. Greek letter
45. Meadow
47. Tennessee _____ Ford
48. "The Trapping of Birdy _____"
49. "The Adventure of the Sussex _____"

DOWN

1. See 16 across
2. "The Story of the Bald-headed _____"
3. What caused the death of 4 down
4. Once powerful Egyptian ruler (abbrev.)
5. Play boisterously
6. Go ___ ___ ladder!
7. "The Adventure of the _____ Men"
9. Wanderer
11. Eager
13. Metal fasteners
15. French law concerning succession in the monarchy
16. "The Adventure of the Blue _____"
19. Scores one in horseshoes
21. ___ de ___, Spanish colony in Africa
22. ____-shoe, slang for detective
26. Youngster
27. Belonging to the Babylonian god of wisdom
28. "The _____ Puzzle"
29. Not easy, tender, or brittle
31. Person entertained
32. "The _____ of the Barrel"
34. "A _____ of Identity"
39. Old Testament character
40. Aromatic herb mentioned in Bible
41. Weapons
45. Book of Old Testament (abbrev.)
46. Conventional unit of pressure (abbrev.)

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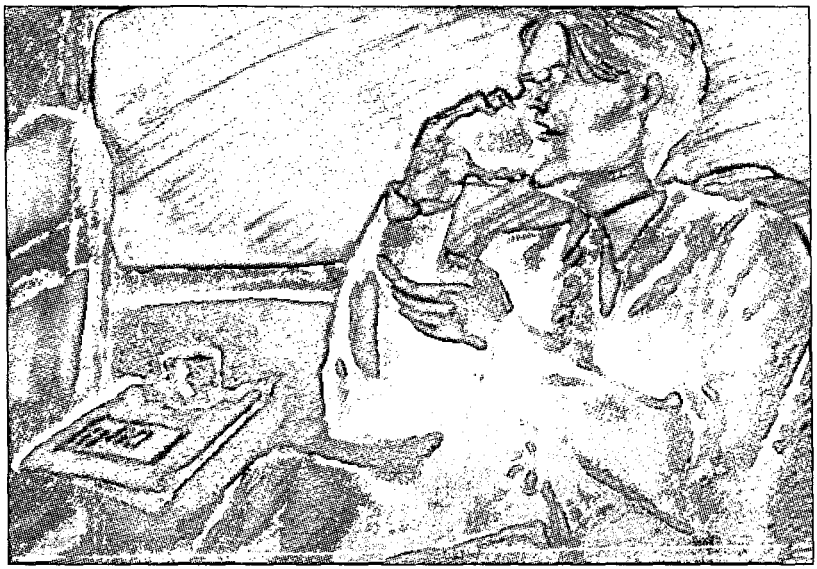

Art by June Levine

TRENTON MAKES, THE WORLD TAKES

by Jeffrey T. Williamson

Just past Trenton, where the Metroliner crossed the ice-choked Delaware by the old black girder bridge with the sign "Trenton Makes, the World Takes," it occurred to Peter Grundy that he might have an opportunity to cause the loudmouth with the cell phone a certain amount of difficulty, if not actual pain. The idea grew and began to take form as the train whirred into the sad postindustrial wasteland preceding Philadelphia.

"Shitadelphia," the loudmouth had called it, braying into his cell phone as he boarded in New York, gesticulating as he spoke, maybe showing off for the sharp-boned blonde with him, maybe just doing what came naturally.

"Did I say 'Shitadelphia'? I meant Philadelphia," the loudmouth added, in a tone so smarmy that Peter felt his jaw go rigid. "I got

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an A.M. meeting tomorrow, then I'm back to New York ASAP. They asked me to lunch but I said, no thanks, cheese steaks give me gas. Ha-hah! They thought I was kidding."

Spewing his vomit as if there weren't people around him who were going home to Philadelphia. As if there weren't people who had grown up there, spent the happiest times of their lives there.

Taking a seat directly behind Peter, the loudmouth made a half-dozen more calls at only slightly reduced volume. In that time Peter learned his name: Laird Driscoll; where he was staying: the Four Seasons; and his business: investment banking. The latter was no surprise. Warren, White, and Coll, the New York law firm where Peter worked as a paralegal, dealt regularly with investment bankers. He had found them all, in one way or another, to be cut from the same impoverished cloth. They were manipulators: of companies, of people, of money. Parasites feeding off the fat in the economy, knowing nothing of making or building or enduring or, for that matter, losing. A deal down the drain? There was always another. But what of a life's work down the drain? What of a life down the drain? What did they know of that?

A journalist for newspapers such as the *Bridgeport Post*, turned advertising writer and creative director, Jeffrey Williamson had a story published some years ago in *Redbook*, making this his second professional fiction publication. He has used the tale to form the first two chapters of his recently completed first novel, a book that details what happens to his central character after the action of this story ends. †

As the train pulled out of Penn Station and accelerated under the Hudson River, Peter opened the laptop he had with him and began transcribing Laird Driscoll's conversations—if for no other reason than having a written record that such creatures were permitted to exist.

Trained as a child in touch-typing, Peter sat easily and erectly, exactly as the manuals prescribed. Chin elevated, elbows at his sides, wrists extended slightly out of the starched white cuffs of his shirt, his long, carefully manicured fingers fluttered over the keyboard. Peter enjoyed using laptops; high on the list of his many resentments toward Warren, White, and Coll was the shortsighted policy that denied them to paralegals. It forced him into subterfuges such as last night's, when he had had to wait for the secretary attached to his group to go home so he could "borrow" the laptop of one of the vacationing associates.

"Company's an e-marketer," Laird Driscoll went on. "Name of

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Directron. . . . 'Direct' plus 'r-o-n.' Profitable. Pretax margins at twenty-nine percent. . . . Yeah, can you believe it, a web company actually making money? Coupla guys founded it five years ago. Their own shekels. No venture cap then, kinda motored along under the radar, but they're at the point now where they gotta grow exponentially or they're gonna get eaten. They want expansion money. Thirty-five mil. For that we'd get a twenty-percent stake, which, by the way, I think we could easily push to twenty-five. Catch is, they want to close the deal by the end of the month. Yeah, nine days from now. One of the partners is going in for surgery. . . . I forgot, some kinda cancer or something."

Peter's fingers froze over the keyboard. *Cancer or something.* Tossed off and passed over, just like that. As if no one within earshot had ever known someone with cancer, had ever seen someone who meant everything to them die of it. A whirring, buzzing sound filled his head, and he ceased to be able to hear Laird Driscoll's words. After a while the sound went away, and he resumed typing, chin up, eyes dead now, expression flat, not a muscle moving in his body. His fingers fluttered as if on their own.

By the time the train reached Newark, Laird had exhausted his calls. A half-dozen people got on the car there, including a man in a camel's-hair coat who took the seat next to Peter's, opened an attaché case, and immediately pulled out a cell phone.

"I'll be home by six-thirty, honey," he said. "Were there great celebrations at the Brookside School today in honor of Sarah Feinberg's ninth year on earth? . . . That's nice. I'll see you in a while. Bye."

Peter peeked at the nametag on the attaché case. Marc Feinberg, Managing Partner, DDG Equity Associates. Banker, too, thought Peter. But a family man, not one of the predators. And yet not entirely admirable: too soft, too obviously pampered, with his plump cheeks and his Rolex and his expensive tasseled loafers. Peter's father had not been soft, had not allowed Peter to be soft. Had him delivering mail in the factory when he was ten—Peter still remembered the terrifying din of the stamping machines and the smell of ozone from the arc welders and the rough, loud workers. And when the strikes had come, his father took him from the Preston Academy to walk with the Wells Fargo guards through the picket line every morning. Aloof and petrified, Peter had held his chin high and looked straight ahead, avoiding the workers' eyes.

"Ignorant bastards," his father said. "They're putting themselves out of work. I'm already paying them twice what my competition in North Carolina does. Can't they see that? Can't they see the plants all around them closing?"

His father had been right. The evidence was outside the train window. Abandoned factories, shattered windows. Fallen walls,

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ornate brick chimneys with nothing attached to them except the remains of a concrete floor. Metuchen. Rahway. Trenton. North Philadelphia. Sad places. Their old steel bones splintered and exposed. Carcasses that no one had even bothered to bury. "Trenton Makes, The World Takes." In spades, he thought with a twisted smile.

An incoming call warbled on the soft guy's cell phone.

"Jake, how are you? . . . I'm on the three o'clock. . . . No, I'm going straight home. I'm going to stay the evening, then back to New York again in the morning. Kid's birthday. Mandatory, you know. By the way, you were absolutely right about Directron. It's something we should move on. And fast. Call me tomorrow morning on my cell. . . ."

Peter actually started when he heard the name "Directron." Two bankers circling the same prey, unaware of each other. Yet he was aware of both.

Outside, the sky clamped down a dull orange grey over a pathetic treeless little lake, lined with wooden fishing huts. The huts were no more than a dozen feet apart, less than twice that distance from the train tracks—the New York–Washington main line. What sort of everyday life did you have to lead to conceive of these shabby, barren, trackside boxes as pleasure? The thought froze his soul, filled him with contempt and fear, and redoubled his anger at all the arrogant Laird Driscolls of the world.

Again, the buzzing, whirring sound filled his head. When it stopped he began to think seriously about a plan to punish Laird Driscoll. It involved pitting Marc Feinberg against him, using the information he had overheard from both. And yet, he might never have carried it out if he had not been given a clear sign, a mandate from whatever capricious and cruel power ruled the world. As he was getting off, he glanced into the seat vacated by Driscoll. There was a cell phone in it. Obviously Driscoll's. Obviously meant to be taken.

"Welcome to Philadelphia, Mr. Grundy."

The hotel doorman reached into Peter's taxi to take his attaché case.

"How are you, Frank?"

"Fine, sir. Staying just tonight?"

"As always."

"How's the case going?"

"Slowly, Frank, slowly."

Peter had never bothered to disabuse the hotel staff of the natural assumption that he was an attorney responsible for the actual conduct of *Rosston Metallurgics v. Ferguson et al.,* rather

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than a paralegal involved in the periodic gathering, ordering, and delivery of files.

He dropped a five-dollar bill into the doorman's hand (he'd expense his generosity tomorrow) and smiled. Staying at a luxury hotel never failed to lift Peter's spirits; Warren, White, and Coll's blue-chip insistence that all employees travel first class was one of the few things he appreciated about the firm. Peter knew of such hotels from vacations and weekend pleasure trips with his mother. The Ritz Carlton in Boston, the Connaught in London, the Mark Hopkins in San Francisco. At the time it had seemed inevitable that he would continue to stay at such places as an adult, after he had taken over the family business. It never once occurred to him that there would be no business to take over, only debts, or that his father would die suddenly of a heart attack, or that his mother would suffer a lingering and far less merciful death.

Once in his room, Peter used Driscoll's cell phone to call Feinberg.

"Marc Feinberg?"

"Speaking." In the background he could hear a little girl's voice call out, "If that's Katie, tell her the party starts at seven," and Marc replying, "It's for me, honey."

"My name's Driscoll," said Peter. "I've got some information you might find useful."

"I'm sorry, do I know you?"

"You may. We're in the same line of work."

"What do you mean?"

"My information's about Directron."

"What?" Peter could almost see Feinberg's ears prick up.

"Directron. The company you're thinking of financing."

"I'm sorry, do you work for Directron?" Cautious now. "Is this in connection with my meeting earlier today?"

"No and no. But if you're planning to invest in the company, we should talk."

"Who *are* you?"

"Maybe we can get together tomorrow in New York. You are going back to the city, aren't you?"

"How do you know that?"

"I'll call you with a time and place."

"How did you get this number?"

Peter clicked off the phone.

Peter dined in the clubby Grill, attached to the hotel bar, rather than the formal Georgian Room, because it was more congenial to single travelers. He ordered a house salad, blackened salmon, and a bottle of Macon-Lugny, '94. The wine and the food were excellent. Throughout most of the meal, the Grill was empty; then a young woman in black tights and an electric blue sweater-dress

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entered and was seated several tables away. A menu was offered, but she waved her hand. Shortly thereafter the waiter reappeared with a drink. She took a respectable swallow, then pulled out a cell phone and began talking.

Is there anyone in the world today who doesn't have a cell phone? Peter thought, his mouth pursing with irritation. Like laptops, cell phones were not generally issued to paralegals, but he could probably finesse a note from one of the senior partners—extensive travel related to the current case, etc., etc. He'd get the phone on a temporary basis, then figure out a way to extend it.

A little later, after the woman had ordered a second drink, Peter got up to go to the men's room. As he passed her table, he smiled. She acknowledged the greeting with a curt nod—one solo traveler to another—then looked away. No encouragement there, thought Peter, but you never knew. She wasn't immediately pretty, but she had an intelligent face. Nice legs, too. Washing up in the men's room, he closed his eyes for a moment and allowed himself to imagine undoing her tights, rolling them slowly down those long legs. And when she lifted up the sweater dress, what gifts for him would there be?

She was talking to the waiter when he returned. She had an unlit cigarette in one hand. "You must be joking! It's okay to smoke three tables away, but not okay here?" She spoke with a British accent.

"I'm sorry, ma'am."

"Whom would I be offending?" she demanded.

"The puritans," said Peter.

She turned away from the waiter to see who had interrupted.

"There's no fighting the puritans," said Peter. "Not in America. They've got sinners like us on the run. Care to join me"—he gestured toward his table, which was in the smoking area—"in purgatory?"

A faintly bemused look came over her face. She spent a long moment looking him over. "Why not?"

They smoked, they talked, they both had another couple of drinks. There was something between them, something more than the alcohol, some sort of spark. Peter invited her up to his room. She agreed.

Later, he stood in front of the window naked, one arm upraised and a faraway look in his eyes.

"Do you think I look like William Penn?"

"And who is William Penn?" She spoke lazily from his bed.

"The fellow your King George gave Pennsylvania to. That's his statue there, on top of City Hall. Come take a look."

She got out of bed and walked to the window next to him.

Outside was the ornate and fantastic Philadelphia City Hall,

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with its huge stone tower topped by a three-story-high floodlit statue.

"Tall chap," she remarked.

"Ancestor of mine."

"Really? So you are a man of lineage."

"I try to carry the burden lightly."

"How good of you."

She stepped behind him and slipped her arms around his chest, the warmth of her breasts and hips pressing against him. She laid her cheek between his shoulder blades.

"Your heart is beating so fast," she said softly.

It was, and he was surprised and a little disturbed by it. He had expected sex: the excitement, the pleasure, the release. But he had not expected anything more. Certainly not what he was feeling now.

Her name was Julia.

His mother's middle name.

Later in the night, with the only light in the room coming from the faint red glow of the digital alarm, he got up, groped around the nightstand for Laird's phone, and went into the bathroom. Fortunately, the phone was still working; Laird must not have realized yet that it was missing. He punched in Feinberg's cell phone number, hoping that, at home and probably in bed, Marc would not have the cell on, and the call would be routed to his voice mail. It was. Peter spoke quietly:

"Marc. Driscoll again. Let's meet around seven, if you can. At the bar in Gull's Restaurant. Fortieth and Third Avenue. This is no joke. I used to work at Directron. I've got information about the company you'd regret not knowing."

He came out of the bathroom chuckling.

"What's so funny?" Julia murmured sleepily.

Startled, because he had not realized he was laughing aloud, he said, "Nothing."

"Tell me."

"Ohhh . . ." He let the word trail off. He was half-inclined to tell her. But no, not yet. Maybe if he saw her again. He never saw women he met on the road more than once, but Julia felt different.

He set the phone on the nightstand as silently as he could. Then he lifted the covers and slipped in next to her, and a little warm cloud of her perfume puffed out. She rolled over and pushed herself against him.

He spent the next morning on the eighth floor of a dingy building near the Reading Terminal Market, going through mounds of dusty files as a tiny, imperious clerk looked on, warning him peri-

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odically of the danger of confusing the order of the ancient records. The third time the clerk spoke to him, Peter set down the file he was holding and looked at the clerk. Just looked at him. Held the clerk's eyes until the clerk turned away. Still he kept looking. The clerk got nervous, started to say something, then laughed a little, then got angry and asked what Peter was doing. Peter didn't answer, he just kept looking. The clerk muttered something about getting some coffee and didn't bother him after that.

By eleven he had gathered five boxes of records. He told the clerk to FedEx them to Warren, White, and Coll, and went into the men's room to wash up. He rolled up the sleeves of his white shirt and soaped his hands and forearms thoroughly, rinsing and wetting his face. He dried off, rolled the sleeves back down, buttoned the cuffs, straightened the knot in his tie, and put his jacket on. Satisfied with his appearance, he had the clerk call a taxi to take him to the Four Seasons Hotel for lunch.

Julia entered the dining room as he was looking over the wine list.

"I thought you couldn't make it until twelve forty-five," said Peter, surprised. She was in Philadelphia to conduct some sort of consumer interviews—focus groups, she'd called it. She was in market research.

She shrugged and made a bored face. "I canceled my first group. Told the agency there were too many no-shows."

"You shouldn't have done that," said Peter.

"Believe me, no one was disappointed. Six women talking about control-top pantyhose is not precisely box office. One *can* smoke here, I hope."

Peter smiled. "I wouldn't sit at any other kind of table."

She dug through a translucent plastic purse and pulled out a loose cigarette and a Bic lighter. Several flakes of tobacco fell out on the tablecloth as she brought it to her lips. The cigarette was distinctly bent in the middle. She put it in her mouth.

"I have exactly one hour," she said, the cigarette bobbing up and down. More flakes fell on the table.

"Smoking is so chic," said Peter.

Julia lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply. "Rather. Makes up for it being so unhealthy."

They both burst out laughing.

"I take it you're not in love with your job," said Peter.

"Is anyone?"

"My father was."

"Let me guess. One of those white-shirted chaps who devoted his entire life to IBM."

"No. He had his own manufacturing company. Here in Philadelphia. Didn't graduate high school."

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"Really?" She looked genuinely surprised. "What about your lineage—that Penn fellow and all?"

"My mother. Philadelphia Main Line, through and through. Knew Grace Kelly when."

"And your job. Do you like it?"

"No."

"But at least the money is good."

"No."

"I don't believe that."

"It's true."

He had told her the night before that he worked for a New York law firm. She had not asked for details, no doubt assuming that he was a lawyer. He was certainly not about to tell her otherwise, and yet . . . quite to his surprise, there was a tiny voice within him that wanted to tell her, that could conceive of a time in the future when he might. That had never happened to him before. He looked at her. He had thought that she was almost plain when he first saw her, but now he realized that was not so. She was just not conventionally pretty. She was more original than that.

On impulse, he reached across the table and took her hand.

"I'm glad to see you."

She made a face. "Next I suppose you'll be calling the waiter and having him light candles."

The thought amused Peter. "Perhaps I will."

She rolled her eyes. But she did not take her hand away.

The hour she had for lunch went far too fast.

"Stay," Peter said. "Have dessert."

"Have to run. There are limits to misbehavior."

"Call. Make up some excuse."

Shaking her head, she dug in her purse and pulled out a cell phone. After punching in the number twice, she flipped the phone shut and shook her head. "Bloody worthless gadgets. I'm getting an out-of-service message. Can I use yours?"

"Sure. In fact, I think it's the exact same model." Peter reached under the table for his attaché case and then he remembered: The phone was not his, it was Laird Driscoll's. By this time, it might even be turned off. More important, depending on how his scheme turned out, there might be a check of phone records. He could not have Julia using it, and possibly being connected to any of the events.

He made a show of going through the attaché case.

"Damn. I must have left it back at the office with the records."

"It's a sign," said Julia, standing up. "God telling me to be a good girl. Can you get the check? I'll reimburse you."

"That's okay. Firm's picking up the tab."

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"And you nattering about your pay!"

"If you only knew." Again, that small voice wanting to tell her the truth.

"Bye." She bent down.

He took her chin in his hand and brought her face to his. Then he kissed her very gently on the lips. And the feeling of genuine tenderness that came over him was accompanied, once again, by a vast sense of surprise.

The unpleasantness started the minute he was back at the firm. The associate whose laptop he'd borrowed had returned a day early—furious that her machine was gone. She gave him a royal dressing-down, within earshot of two other paralegals and three secretaries.

Then there was a message from accounting, which led to a humiliating session with the arch and effeminate assistant comptroller, who challenged every meal and hotel expense he'd submitted over the last three months. "One hundred and forty-three dollars for dinner! Come, come, Peter! If you were entertaining clients that would be one thing, but you're a paralegal, not an attorney. Or did you recently pass the bar, sweetie, and forget to invite me to the party?"

The capper was the news that in two weeks he was being moved from his window office to a cubicle—to make room for a summer intern!

"Orders from on high," said the office manager, shrugging her shoulders. "Competition for these kids is fierce. Gotta make 'em happy while they're here."

Stony-faced, Peter watched the office manager leave. He was sick with anger—literally nauseous. It had taken him eight years and endless politicking to get his office. And they were taking it away, like that, to give it to a kid who would stay a couple of months and probably never come back. He imagined the humiliation of moving to the cubicle area, being thrown into the midst of gum-snapping secretaries from Queens, unable to escape their endless, trivial chatter. And the sly, amused glances from those who felt he had always put on airs and was getting his comeuppance.

He hated Warren, White, and Coll! Hated the lawyers who ran the firm, hated the employees who sucked up to them, hated all the paper-shufflers and deal-cutters and parasites that swarmed like maggots over the country and devoured all that was dear and fine and worthwhile.

His hands were shaking when he picked up Laird Driscoll's cell phone. He had two calls to make. The first would be to Laird himself, a duplicate of the call he had made to Feinberg. He had infor-

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mation Laird would want to know before doing any deal with Directron. "Driscoll" had called Feinberg. Now "Feinberg" would call Driscoll. And thus the mutual meeting would be arranged.

And the second call Peter would make that afternoon would insure that the meeting would begin on a very unpleasant note.

At a quarter to seven, the bar at Gull's was already jammed, and there was a queue at the reservations stand for dinner. The crowd was young and well dressed. Lots of suits, lots of black on the women. It was a big after-work spot, but far enough from Warren, White, and Coll to avoid anyone Peter might know. More important, it was just across the street from Laird Driscoll's firm.

Peter stepped up to the far side of the horseshoe-shaped bar, where he could see people as they came in the door. He ordered a vodka gimlet, straight up, hoping it would calm his nerves. With the moment of truth approaching, he was far more agitated than he had anticipated. He wondered if he had gone too far with his last phone call, in which, posing as Feinberg, he had called Feinberg's daughter at her school. For the umpteenth time he went over the call in his mind.

"Daddy?" Sarah Feinberg had answered after being called out of class to the phone. She had a high, sweet voice. She sounded worried.

Peter had done his best to be soothing. "Sarah, I'm a friend of your dad's. My name is Driscoll."

"But Mrs. Grantham said . . ."

"Maybe she was confused. It doesn't matter. What does matter is you need to call your dad. You need to give him a message."

"A message? Is everything all right?"

"Everything's okay. Completely. Don't worry. You just need to tell your dad that it's very important that he and I meet tonight. So important that I asked you to call and remind him. Can you tell him that, Sarah?"

"To go to his meeting tonight?"

"Yes."

"Can't you call him?"

"I could. But the meeting is very important. I knew if you called he'd be sure not to forget. In fact, why don't you tell him that. Use those exact words. That Mr. Driscoll said he knew if you called, your dad wouldn't forget."

The bartender set his drink in front of him. He took a sip, watching the tremor in his hand translate into a confusion of pale green rings on the surface of the drink.

Marc Feinberg walked in the door.

He was wearing the camel's-hair coat he'd worn yesterday, but he looked less tonsured, less soft—in fact, he looked as if he were

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spoiling for a fight. The phone call had obviously had its effect. A little electric thrill at his own cleverness pushed aside Peter's uncertainty, calmed his nerves more effectively than the drink.

It was time to call Driscoll up in his office across the street.

"Driscoll speaking."

"It's Marc Feinberg. I'm here at Gull's. By the bar."

"So?"

Peter was caught off guard. "We talked about meeting."

"Right. And now I'm supposed to come rushing down to hear what you have to say?" That sneering, insolent tone.

"It's to your advantage."

"Yeah? How come I get the feeling it's the other way around?"

"It's not," said Peter.

"How long ago did you say you worked at Directron?"

Peter could feel the aggression behind the question, feel it undermining him, weakening him. "I didn't say," he responded, struggling to stay calm.

"Who'd you work under?"

Peter felt himself losing control of the conversation.

"I'm wearing a camel's-hair overcoat, tortoiseshell glasses," he said hastily. "I'll see you in five minutes."

He clicked off, his hand shaking. He drained the remainder of the gimlet, feeling the chilled sweetness turn to soothing heat.

One last call now, only one last call to make.

He punched in Feinberg's number. He imagined the signal jumping from his phone to some antenna, to some routing center, perhaps even to some satellite 24,000 miles overhead, then back down again to Feinberg less than twenty-five feet away.

He saw Feinberg reach into his overcoat and pull out his phone.

"Hello." Feinberg's tone was flat, perfectly devoid of intonation.

"Are you at Gull's?"

"You son of a bitch!" The syllables spattered out, twisted with animosity. "Where did you get my daughter's name? How do you know her school?"

Peter flinched, unable for an instant to respond.

"I've already talked the to Philadelphia police."

The police? Peter felt a twinge of fear. He hadn't expected anyone to be calling the police.

"And I'm *this far* from calling the FBI."

Peter could see him hold up his thumb and forefinger in demonstration of "this far," could see the fury in his face. In a painful instant, Peter realized how true his aim must have been: Daughter and family were obviously the heart of Marc Feinberg's life.

He wondered suddenly if there were police in the bar. In plainclothes, watching him. Well, no, they would be watching for Driscoll. Unless they were somehow monitoring his cell-phone

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call. Was that possible? Could they tell what physical location cell calls originated from? Were they about to grab hold of him?

Genuinely frightened now, Peter looked around the room. There was probably still a chance of calling it off, explaining it was just a prank.

"Marc," he began in a conciliatory tone.

But Feinberg cut him off. "Don't 'Marc' me, you bastard."

"I was just trying—"

"What are you, some kind of pathetic little back-shop coward, looking for a payoff?"

Back-shop coward? Payoff? Driscoll had implied the same thing.

"All these little mysterious calls."

Contemptuous. Completely contemptuous of him.

The whirring, buzzing sound came into Peter's head. He closed his eyes. So Feinberg was like Driscoll, after all. One of the arrogant ones, one of the takers. He opened his eyes and looked out the window. Across the street there was Driscoll himself, emerging from the building. In shirtsleeves, jaywalking between the crawling rush-hour traffic. Expecting the cars to avoid *him.* Arrogant, even in that. Arrogant like them all.

Okay, he would turn arrogance against arrogance. In his best insolent Driscoll voice, Peter said:

"I just *called* Sarah, Marc, I didn't *kidnap* her."

"I don't want you speaking her name!"

"Why not? It's a very nice name."

"Shut up!" Loud. Loud enough for heads to turn.

"I'll bet she's pretty, too. What, she's nine now? That pre-Lolita age."

"I'll kill you!" Loud enough for Peter to hear without his phone. Heads turning everywhere now.

"I doubt that," said Peter softly, and he clicked off the phone.

The next few seconds played out uncannily as they had in Peter's imagination.

An angry-looking Driscoll came through the door, and almost immediately his eyes settled on Feinberg.

Driscoll said something Peter couldn't quite make out, probably Marc's name, and Feinberg started moving toward him, shoving people aside. Driscoll's expression shifted from anger to puzzlement—probably wondering what Feinberg was in such a lather about, seeing as how *he* was the put-out party. He was frowning when Feinberg swung and hit him on the side of the head. Driscoll, who must have been caught off balance, fell to the floor.

Peter's eyes widened. "Take *that,* Mr. Shitadelphia!" he murmured gleefully.

"Get up, you bastard," Marc Feinberg was shouting. "Get up!"

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There was a buzz now in the bar, and a little circle had opened up around Feinberg. Diners in the restaurant area were rising from their tables, linen napkins in hand, trying to see what was going on. Peter and all the people on his side of the bar stood with them. A large man in a dark blazer had materialized and was moving with great urgency toward the source of the commotion.

Feinberg was still shouting, "Get up!" when the bouncer reached him and grabbed him by the arms.

Somebody said, "Round one to the guy in the overcoat!"

There were a few laughs among the crowd.

"Perfect!" Peter whispered. "Perfect, perfect, perfect!" Now all that was left was to see the expression on Laird Driscoll's face when he got up.

A man's voice called out, "Hey, this guy's hurt. His head's bleeding!"

Bleeding? thought Peter. That was not possible. He'd seen Feinberg take his swing.

"Somebody call nine-one-one!"

"Oh Jesus!" a woman cried, "Look at all the blood!"

Blood? Feinberg's swing had caught Driscoll on the side of the head, not the nose, which was the only place a punch like that could possibly have drawn blood.

"He hit him with something!" another man shouted. "He hit him with something hard! Stop that guy!"

The bouncer escorting the struggling Feinberg out the door looked back.

Something hard? thought Peter. *The cell phone?*

"Call nine-one-one." It was a voice next to Peter, a small dark-haired woman. It took him a second to realize she was talking to him.

"Call nine-one-one. You've got a cell phone."

Stupidly, Peter looked down at the phone in his hand.

"What's the matter with you? Call!"

Peter was paralyzed.

The woman grabbed the phone. "For God's sake, I'll make the call!"

"No!" He wrenched the phone away from her. "Don't touch it!" he said viciously.

The woman stared at him, open-mouthed.

Peter realized he was going to be sick. He turned away from the woman and began making his way around the bar, toward the crowd at the door. He had to leave. He had to get out of the bar before the police arrived. He had to get out *immediately.*

Walking fast. Pushing his way past a waiter. Approaching the edge of the crowd around where Driscoll had fallen.

The sound of a siren coming up the avenue.

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Shoving hard through the crowd now. Not far from the door. His mouth flooding with moisture. His stomach heaving. Hand clamped over his face.

Flashing red lights outside the window.

Just before the exit. And for a horrible instant face-to-face with Marc Feinberg, sweat dripping down his reddened face, chest heaving, mouth hanging open, bouncer gripping his arm.

Their eyes met briefly.

Then Peter was out the door.

He knelt between two parked cars and vomited. When he had control of himself, he took out a pocket handkerchief and blew his nose and wiped his mouth. He walked to the corner, threw the handkerchief away in the trash, then crossed Third Avenue. He didn't want to have anything to do with Gull's or the events that had just taken place there. But he had to know what had actually happened.

A police car pulled up behind the ambulance. A man and a woman officer got out and ambled inside, not seeming to be in any huge hurry. Several minutes passed. The crowd started to disperse.

Peter began to wonder if everything was okay. Maybe the business with the blood was not actually serious. Maybe Feinberg's swing had clipped Driscoll in the nose, and delivered a kind of temporary knockout in the process. Maybe Driscoll was being helped up right now, a little woozy, in pain, but essentially okay.

Peter shivered. It was cold, and reaction to the excitement was setting in. He was trembling, actually, the muscles of his neck and back tensing up involuntarily. It had been at least ten minutes since the police had gone inside Gull's. The crowd on the sidewalk had pretty much gone away.

A car pulled up behind the ambulance and turned on its flashers. Two men in overcoats got out. They looked like detectives. They went inside the bar.

Peter's hopeful mood vanished. The sick feeling returned. He felt weak, not sure he could stand. He looked around, found a y-shaped fire-hose connector protruding from the building behind him, and sat down, his legs out, the brick wall cold against his back.

Then the cell phone rang.

Peter started at the sound, then he was afraid. Why would the phone ring now? He answered his own question: Friend. Business acquaintance. Whatever. No one knew yet what had happened to Laird.

But what if the call was coming from across the street? Maybe from Driscoll himself, Driscoll who was conscious and angry and

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telling the police that he couldn't have called Feinberg, he'd lost his phone, and having them call the number to check out his story. That would be wonderful!

The phone warbled once, twice, three times, the sound muffled by his jacket.

Hand trembling, he pulled the phone out, pressed the button, and held it to his ear.

His hope evaporated once more. It was a woman's voice, light and upbeat. Probably one of Driscoll's friends. He closed his eyes as the woman spoke.

"Hey, are you back in town, Julia, or are you still focus-grouping with those sad pantyhose women in Philadelphia?"

Peter blinked. Julia? Focus groups?

"Julia, listen, if you can hear me, I'll call back. We've got a bad connection."

The woman clicked off.

Peter stared at the phone in complete confusion. Could there be another Julia in Philadelphia for the same reason? No, not possible. But then how would Julia's friend have gotten Driscoll's phone number?

And then he realized the answer: He had Julia's phone. Not Driscoll's, but *Julia's*.

Peter closed his eyes and held the phone against his forehead.

Suddenly, it was all shatteringly clear. They had both put their phones on the night table at the St. Regis. And he had taken hers, and she his. He had even noticed at lunch how similar the phones were. And all his calls today were on her phone. The calls to Driscoll. To Feinberg. To Feinberg's daughter at school. All on Julia's phone. All on her phone records, plain as day for the police to see.

The phone rang again, but he did not answer. It rang a third time. When it stopped, Peter looked up. Across the street another unmarked sedan had pulled up, and two more detectives were getting out. And behind the sedan, a van with some kind of insignia on the side. He could not make out the insignia, but the van filled him with dread. With effort, he stood up and headed for the crosswalk. He had to get closer, had to read the insignia.

By the time he was halfway across the avenue, he saw: New York County Medical Examiner's Office. The morgue.

He stood stock-still in the middle of Third Avenue, staring at the van. The Don't Walk sign stopped flashing and turned a solid red. Then there were horns blowing. Cars, trucks, taxis accelerating around him. Blindly, in a cacophony of horns and screeching tires, he made his way back. At the corner, he stopped and grabbed onto the light stanchion.

The crossing sign turned to Walk.

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He heard a metallic *cha-chink* sound. It came from inside a metal box attached to the stanchion.

Obviously, the box controlled the traffic light. He had never noticed how loud these boxes were. Maybe it was a sign of temporary madness, in which trivial sounds were magnified and the rest of the world faded away. He wished the world *would* fade away.

The box was painted bright yellow, but the paint was peeling, revealing an ancient army green underneath. He reached out and touched it, running his fingertips like a blind man over the raised letters at the bottom: Delaware-Eastern Foundries, Trenton, New Jersey.

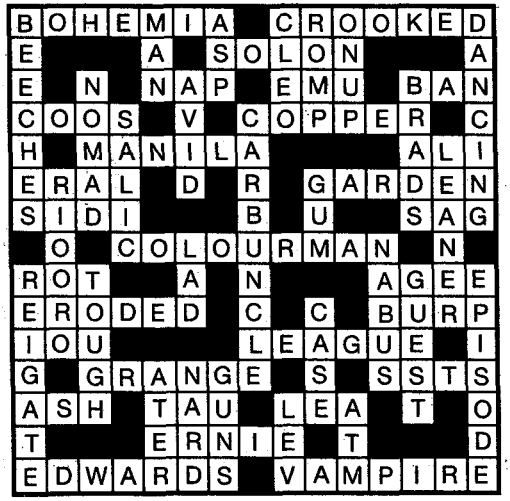
He thought back to yesterday's train ride, which now seemed an eternity ago. He remembered the sad towns and the broken factories and his fury with Laird Driscoll. He remembered his night with Julia and his surprise at the emotions she had stirred in him. And the lunch they'd had and the tobacco falling from her crooked cigarette and her laugh and holding her hand and kissing her and thinking, with so much surprise, that she, unlike all the others, unlike anyone he had ever met in his life, could be a soulmate, a woman to love.

He remembered the icy Delaware River and the black girder bridge with the old sign, "Trenton Makes, the World Takes."

His eyes filled and the left side of his mouth twisted down.

In spades, he thought for the second time in as many days. In spades. ●

Solution to the Mystery Crossword



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The Theft of the Wedding Doves

by Edward D. Hoch

"You're going to Hawaii without me?" Gloria asked when Nick Velvet first told her of his new assignment. He immediately decided that would be a bad idea.

"No, I was thinking you could come along and we'd make a vacation out of it." The spring had been damp and chilly in the suburbs north of New York and he couldn't blame her for wanting to get away. In past years they'd often been boating on Long Island Sound by the first week in May.

"What is it you have to steal this time?"

"There's a fancy wedding in Honolulu on Saturday. A man is paying my top rate of fifty thousand to steal two doves when they're released after the ceremony."

Gloria was loading the dishwasher with their dinner plates and she kept on working while they talked. "Is that easy or hard?"

"Easy if I could take them the night before. Practically impossible the way he wants it done. The doves will be there in a big ornate cage, in full view of everyone. The cage is opened, and they vanish. He doesn't want me to steal the cage, just the birds."

She thought about that. "It's a magic trick. I've seen it done on stage. The cage and the bird both disappear, even if audience members have their hands on the cage."

Nick nodded and opened a beer. "Invented by a magician named

Nick Velvet is easily the most popular of Edward D. Hoch's more than two dozen series characters. Excluding a gap of a few months in 1996, the series has been under option for American television continuously for twenty years—which must surely be some kind of record! Perhaps 2002 will be the year the TV series finally gets produced. In the meantime, we're sure you'll enjoy Nick's clever new short-story case.

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De Kolta in the late eighteen hundreds. If not supported by the magician, the small cage collapsed of its own weight into a long, slender bundle only two inches thick. It was yanked by a pull up the magician's sleeve to between his shoulder blades. In the beginning, live birds were used, but they were often killed or injured by the collapsing cage. Now the birds are artificial."

"Would that work?"

He shook his head. "This is a big elaborate cage with two birds, very much alive."

"Then how will you do it?"

"There's always a way."

Three days later Nick and Gloria flew to Hawaii. They were a middle-aged couple celebrating their wedding anniversary and he'd even bought her a ring for the occasion. They landed at Honolulu International Airport on a sunny afternoon with the temperature at a perfect 75 and went directly to their hotel on Waikiki Beach, near the Royal Hawaiian Shopping Center. It was a place only a tourist would choose, but that's what they were for this week. Nick's sole concession to his job was to make certain the room was equipped with a fax machine.

After a good night's sleep, Gloria went off to the shopping center and Nick telephoned the number he'd been given. It had all started back home, when a man named Gilbert Fowler called him at the special number reserved for clients. There would be a wedding in Honolulu on the second Saturday of May. One of the island's wealthiest bachelors was marrying a movie star of some renown in a wedding sure to attract vast media attention. After the minister pronounced them husband and wife, a pair of white doves would be released from a large ornate cage. Nick's job was to steal the doves just as they were set free.

"What for?" Nick had asked.

"I understood that you don't ask questions. The doves are of little or no value. That's all you need to know. But since you're so curious, I'll tell you. It's a practical joke I'm playing on the groom."

"My fee would be fifty thousand dollars plus expenses, half in advance. That's a great deal for a practical joke."

"We've been friendly rivals a long time. Someday I'll tell you what he did at my wedding."

He gave Nick a number where he could be reached on the Thursday morning before the wedding. "I'll need certain information," Nick told his client. "And an invitation to the wedding, if possible."

"I can't swing that. The bride-to-be is sensitive about keeping the media away. They'll have security guards checking on everyone. For that high a fee, you're on your own."

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"All right. Get me the name of the caterer, also the security firm and the minister who's marrying them. Most important, find out where they're renting the doves."

His client sighed. "I'll do what I can." He hung up before Nick could request anything else.

Now Nick phoned the number he'd been given and heard Gilbert Fowler's familiar voice. "Did you have a good flight, Mr. Velvet?"

"A bit long from New York, but otherwise it was all right. Can I meet you?"

"Certainly. Suppose we make it an hour from now, at eleven. Do you know where King Kamehameha's statue is?"

"No," he admitted.

"In front of the Judiciary Building. There are usually some tourists around, taking pictures. What will you be wearing?"

"One of those Hawaiian shirts, mostly red and green. I'll have a camera around my neck."

"All right. I'll find you."

"Eleven o'clock," Nick confirmed, and hung up.

The Judiciary Building was on King Street near the State Capitol. It was some distance from the hotel, and Nick took a taxi. He hoped he looked like a typical tourist, and the driver took him for one, offering a trip around the city to point out the sights. "You don't want to miss the Pearl Harbor memorials," he said.

"I'm planning to see them," Nick assured him. "But I want to spend some time around the capitol."

"That is the statue of King Kamehameha, in front of the Judiciary Building. He ruled from eighteen ten to eighteen nineteen. And across the street is the Iolani Palace. There are guided tours every fifteen minutes, and the Royal Hawaiian Band gives a free concert at noon on Fridays."

"Thanks. I'll remember that." He paid his fare and gave the driver a tourist-sized tip.

He expected Gilbert Fowler to be dressed casually, too, but when the man appeared he was wearing a lightweight summer suit with a shirt and tie. Nick guessed his age at mid forties, and he was putting on weight around the middle. He wore the suitcoat open, probably out of necessity.

"You're Velvet?" he asked. "Don't shake hands. We're just a couple of strangers talking about the monument." He pointed with one hand. "See those four tableaux at the base? They portray four key moments in the king's life."

"Interesting," Nick murmured. "Do you have what I need?"

"Everything should be here, including a sketch map of the plantation." He passed Nick a folded tourist map of the island.

"What plantation is that?"

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"The groom, Russ Kona, is a pineapple millionaire. His plantation is one of the island's largest still in private hands. That's where the wedding will be, far from the prying eyes of the press."

"If I need anything else, will you be at that same phone number?"

"Tomorrow. On Saturday I'll be at the wedding. I'll phone your hotel Sunday morning and arrange to pay the rest of your fee." He raised his voice a bit and told Nick, "This statue is a replica of one in the Kohala district on the Big Island."

"Do I deliver the birds on Sunday?"

"Just release them Saturday night. I don't want them."

"That's great," Nick said. He was being paid fifty thousand dollars to steal a pair of doves the client didn't even want. He stepped back a few paces to take a picture. His client quickly lost himself among the real tourists, perhaps not wanting to be included in the photo.

Nick waited until he was safely back at the hotel before unfolding the map and extracting the envelope that was inside. The sketched map of Russ Kona's plantation was good enough for his purposes. He was mostly interested in the actual site of the wedding, behind the big main house with its swimming pool and tennis court overlooking the ocean. Next he scanned the addresses of the caterer, the security firm, and the dove supplier. It was obvious he'd have to enter the grounds in the guise of some sort of service employee, and he was still pondering the question when his eyes fell on a copy of the morning paper left at their door and picked up by Gloria when she went out shopping.

There it was, a story running down the paper's left-hand column: *Glamour Wedding Lures Worldwide Media.* "Saturday's wedding of pineapple millionaire Russ Kona, 51, to actress Rita Madison, 24, has attracted press coverage from around the world. Mr. Kona has close ties to Japanese business interests and Miss Madison is the new box-office favorite in America and Europe. She first gained prominence in last year's remake of *The Asphalt Jungle,* the film credited with launching Marilyn Monroe's career more than fifty years ago. The influx of journalists seeking stories and photographs of the private wedding has led to unusually tight security measures at the Kona plantation, where the ceremony is scheduled for six o'clock Saturday evening. A canopy will be erected to shield the wedding party from helicopters hired by press photographers, and a local security firm is hiring extra guards for the event."

Nick quickly skimmed the rest of the article and then got to work. He phoned someone in New York who'd helped him in the past with forged documents. "Mandy, this is Nick. I need an ID card with my picture showing that I'm a retired New York City

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police officer. I can paste in a color photo I have with me if you can fax me the ID within an hour."

A voice squawked on the other end of the line. "I've got nothing in my files to copy for that, Nick."

"Make up something. Before they can check it I'll be out of here. Use the Vic Nicholas name on it."

It was late afternoon in New York, but within an hour the requested document had been faxed to his hotel room, complete with space for his photograph. Across the street at the mall he found a shop that laminated photos and documents. He'd learned in the past that lamination carried with it an irrational degree of authenticity, as well as helping disguise the fact that the document had traveled through a fax machine.

The headquarters of Aloha Security was in Honolulu's tallest office building. There were nearly a dozen men waiting for interviews in the outer office and when Nick approached the receptionist she automatically reached out to hand him a pink form. He showed her the laminated ID and said, "I hear you're hiring extra people this weekend. I'm retired from the New York City Police Department."

She glanced at him, and at the photo on the card, and smiled. "Have a seat, Mr. Nicholas. I'll take this right in to Mr. Sandked."

He sat down with the others and when she returned she had a blue form for him to fill out. "As soon as you complete this, bring it to me and I'll take you right in for an interview."

Wayne Sandked proved to be a large man with a black goatee and a ready smile. His thick glasses caught the light as he said, "Mr. Nicholas! Pleased to meet you! Have a seat."

"I'm out here for a while," Nick explained, "and I heard you were hiring extra people for the weekend. I've had police and security experience if you need it."

"We sure do," Sandked told him. "I've been interviewing all morning and only found two people I could hire. Half the applicants were reporters and media folk trying to crash the wedding. Trouble is, I've got no time to run checks on everyone. We need at least a half-dozen more people for tomorrow and Saturday."

"I'm your man," Nick told him. "Twenty years with the NYPD."

Sandked tapped the ID card on his desk. "I've never seen one of these retired-cop cards before, but I'll take a chance on you. It's only for two days, but I can pay you a little better than the others. How does a hundred a day sound?"

"Fine."

"Good. Report to this address at nine in the morning and they'll fit you for a uniform."

"Do I have to carry a weapon?"

"Handcuffs but no gun. You're to report out there tomorrow and

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see Major Erdman. He's in charge of the detail. You'll get the lay of the land and make sure there are no photographers camping out among the pineapples. The major will assign some of our regular men to remain there overnight, but you'll be finished by five. Saturday will be a long day, though. We'll want you there by nine in the morning to search for intruders and then to help check invitations as the wedding party and guests start to arrive. The wedding will be formal, which means tuxedos and long gowns for all guests. There'll be about two hundred, and the ceremony is planned for six o'clock, followed by cocktails and dinner. We'll want you there until the bride and groom depart on their honeymoon, whatever time that is."

"I understand."

"Major Erdman can answer any other questions you might have." He rose from behind his desk and shook hands with Nick. "Good to have you aboard."

Nick returned to their hotel room to find Gloria inspecting her purchases. "You bought all that?" he asked.

"It isn't much, Nicky. Have you been working?"

He told her about his job with the security firm. "It looks like you'll be on your own for the next two days. Sunday we can go for a dinner cruise if you'd like."

"Have you figured out how to steal the birds?"

"Not until I see them, but at least I'll be inside."

In the morning Nick was fitted for his uniform, with some minor alterations made while he waited. Then he drove his rental car out to the Kona plantation north of Pearl City, where Major Erdman was expecting him. Erdman was a slender man with a distinct military bearing, lacking Sandked's smile or any sign of friendliness. "This isn't the NYPD, Nicholas. Remember that. My teams work with military precision. I know you're only temporary, but you will obey orders. Come with me now and I'll show you around."

Nick followed him up the long driveway to a main house that could only be called a mansion. The newel posts on the front stairs were topped with carved wooden pineapples. A pert redhead with a clipboard came down to meet them. "Major Erdman, I was looking for you. We've got some flowers arriving later today."

Erdman paused to listen but did not grant her a smile. When he saw her peering at Nick he introduced them. "This is Monica Mavro, the wedding planner. Meet Vic Nicholas, one of our security guards. If I'm not on the scene, Nicholas, you are to take instructions from Miss Mavro."

The cell phone on his belt beeped and Erdman answered it. His

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frown deepened as he listened. He turned to the redhead. "There's a truck at the gate with a thousand orchids for the swimming pool."

"I wasn't expecting them this early," Monica said, "but send them in."

Erdman motioned to Nick. "Stay here in case she needs you. She can tell you as much about the arrangements as I can. Then when the flower truck leaves, ride with it back to the gate. Make sure the driver doesn't do anything funny."

Monica Mavro shook her head as the security man walked away. "I've done a hundred weddings and I never had one with security this tight. That guy thinks he's still in the army!"

"Is Rita Madison that big a star?" Nick wondered.

"She is with young people, and they're the ones who buy the magazines and tabloids. She was a pop singer before she made that movie, had a couple of hit albums. Now they say she's the new Marilyn Monroe. A cover photo of the wedding could add fifty or a hundred thousand to a magazine's sales, and more than that to a tabloid's. Russ Kona doesn't want their wedding turned into a circus, though, and he's got the money to keep it private."

A truck lumbered up the driveway and came to a stop by a kidney-shaped swimming pool at the back of the house. "Is this the place for the orchids?" the driver asked.

"They go in the pool. I'll help you with the arrangement."

The driver and his assistant carefully removed the flowers on large trays and began placing them in the water. "Make sure the automatic pool cleaner is shut off or it'll suck the flowers into the hose."

"I'll do that right now," Monica said, going into a small bathhouse where the controls were located. She returned with a long-handled pool skimmer and began positioning the floating orchids with it.

"I've never seen anything like this," Nick admitted.

"The ceremony will be over there, on the far side of the pool. It'll be brief, but we'll have folding chairs for the guests in this area. Miss Madison thought the orchids would be a nice touch. She saw it done once at a Hollywood wedding, and I told her it was a great idea."

As she worked, Nick noticed a striking young woman with long blond hair and pale blue eyes come out of the house and walk toward them. She wore a halter top and low-slung jeans that left her navel exposed. "Here comes the bride," Monica said under her breath. "Prepare to swoon."

"What's that on her shoulder?" Nick asked softly.

"Pineapple tattoo, a sign of true love."

She introduced Nick to Rita Madison, who barely noticed him.

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Security guards were no doubt part of her everyday life. "Are these all the orchids, Monica?" she asked.

"One thousand, just as we ordered."

"They're a bit small."

"Don't worry. They'll fill the pool. You can't have a Hawaiian wedding without tons of orchids."

The actress eyed the pool uncertainly. "Well, it's in your hands. I'll be in my room if you need me."

As she retreated into the house, Nick asked, "Is she living here?"

"Sure. They've been an item for the past six months. Don't you read the columns?"

"I guess not." He made a half-hearted effort to help with the rest of the orchids. "What else are they having for the ceremony?"

"Everything you could imagine. It's his third marriage but the first for her, and he's pulling out all the stops. Her bridal gown was designed by one of the top Hollywood people. After the ceremony there'll be four bars open for guests, and then all two hundred will dine on a lavish meal, with the salad, main course, and dessert all built around a pineapple theme."

"What about the ceremony itself?"

She produced a program from her clipboard. "Here's a list of the readings and who'll be giving them. Russ wanted his fifteen-year-old son to give the first reading, but his ex-wife wouldn't allow him to come. Baxter Azul is filling in. He's the plantation foreman."

Nick glanced over the printed program, trying to appear only casually interested. "Wedding music on a harp?"

"That was my suggestion. A touch of heaven."

"What's this? Just after the minister performs the ceremony it says *Release of doves.*"

"We're releasing a pair of doves from a big ornate cage next to the happy couple. The best man will handle that."

Nick gave her a smile. "I'll bet it was your idea, too."

"Well, I had a bit of help from the best man."

"Who's that?"

"An old business friend of Russ's. His name is Gilbert Fowler."

It shouldn't have surprised Nick to learn that his client was to be Russ Kona's best man. Fowler had told him they were close friends who played practical jokes on one another. Still, it seemed odd that Nick would be stealing the doves virtually out of the hands of the person who was paying him. After he rode back to the front gate in the flower truck he found an opportunity to use his cell phone and call Fowler.

"Are you in place?" his employer asked.

"Yes. I can only talk a minute. You didn't tell me you were to be the best man at this affair."

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"That's not important. Do your job."

"My method will involve a smoke bomb—"

"No! No smoke!"

"Are you allergic to it?"

"No smoke," he repeated, and hung up.

Nick sighed and stared at the phone in his hand. With all the security on hand there was no way he could steal the birds without a diversion of some sort. If it couldn't be smoke, it would have to be something else.

That night in their hotel room Gloria could see that he was restless. "It isn't going well, is it?" she commented.

"Not as well as it should be. I had it all worked out and the client vetoed my suggestion."

"These are birds you're stealing?"

He nodded. "A pair of trained doves. Apparently you can rent them to be released at wedding ceremonies and they fly off."

"Wouldn't that be more appropriate for a divorce?"

"I need suggestions, not wisecracks," he grumbled.

In the morning he was up early and on the job before nine, reporting to Major Erdman at the front gate of the Kona plantation. He was surprised to see Wayne Sandked, the man who'd hired him, also in attendance. He was standing with a tall, slender man whose suntanned face was accented by a moustache that seemed bleached by the tropic sun. Nick observed that he was wearing jodhpurs and an expensive silk shirt, and guessed at once that this was the groom, Russ Kona.

". . . lived here all my life," Kona was telling the security men. "Hawaii provides one-third of all the pineapples grown, and sixty percent of those used for canning. A good share of them come from the plants you see out there. Usually I'm more than willing to get a bit of publicity for my business, but this day is different. Rita doesn't want the press all over the place and I can't blame her. This is her wedding day and she wants to enjoy it." He glanced briefly in Nick's direction, taking in the security uniform, and then handed a folder of papers over to Major Erdman. "This is the revised guest list, with some last-minute additions by Rita. Also there are lists of the caterer's people, the tent and chair crew, the minister, and the musicians. A harpist will play during the ceremony, with a twelve-piece orchestra for the dinner and reception. No one gets in if his or her name is not on the list. Oh, and someone will be delivering the wedding flowers—other than the orchids, which were brought in yesterday."

"I understand, sir," Major Erdman said as Sandked looked on. He scanned the list quickly and said, "Mr. Fowler arrived about an hour ago."

"He did? I haven't seen him."

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Erdman consulted his own list. "I've been on duty since four. I checked him in at five past eight. The tent crew was here at six, and your wedding planner, Miss Mavro, is here, too."

Russ Kona nodded. "She's inside with Rita, going over the arrangements. What about the doves?"

"No sign of them yet."

Kona headed back to the house and Nick asked Major Erdman where he would be stationed. But it was Wayne Sandked who answered. "Shouldn't he be watching that tent crew, Major? We don't want them trying any funny business at the wedding site."

Erdman quickly agreed. "Get over there, Nicholas. Make sure their names correspond to the list we have."

The tent proved to be a large canopy that stretched from the end of the swimming pool to the hill overlooking the plantation fields below. Kona had given his workers the day off with pay, an effective way to keep them from intruding on the wedding and its preparations. Nick found a dozen men around the pool and the hillside, driving the final stakes to hold the canopy in place. Then they would unload two hundred folding chairs for the guests. As the local newspaper had explained, the canopy was not to keep out the sun but the prying lenses of photographers in helicopters.

The workers' names all checked out with the list Nick had, and after a time he saw the red-haired wedding planner, Monica Mavro, bearing down on him. Today she wore white slacks and a flowered shirt. "How's it going?" she asked, remembering him from their previous conversation. "You keeping these boys in line?"

"They're no problem," he assured her.

"I wonder what happened to the stone cupid that was here yesterday. I thought it contributed a nice touch."

"Flew away like the doves, I suppose."

"Oh, the doves have arrived." She gestured toward the big house. "I'm keeping them inside, out of the heat."

"I'd like to see them," Nick said, acting like a bird-lover.

"Come on. Just a peek."

He followed her inside across the pink marble floor to a table where the two white doves waited for their big moment. They were in a large square cage made of wood and wire, with a domed top that held four glass spheres, each less that a half-inch across and positioned in different directions. A small metal tab on top had a ring attached for hanging or carrying the cage.

"It should make a dramatic finale to the ceremony," Nick commented.

"I hope so. I'll take the cage out as soon as those workmen leave."

"Do you have to buy the doves?"

She shook her head. "We rent them. They're trained to fly back

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to the owner's roof so they can be used again. The best man furnished the cage. It's quite elaborate."

"It certainly is that," Nick agreed. But he'd been instructed not to steal the cage, just the birds.

Finally the chairs were all in place. "The flowers are late," Monica said, glancing nervously at her watch. She unclipped the cell phone from her belt and punched in a number, walking away from the swimming pool as she spoke into it.

Nick was left to contemplate the sight of one thousand orchids, all but obliterating the water they floated upon. As he watched, the still waters shifted for just an instant. And he was staring into the dead face of his client, Gilbert Fowler, there among the orchids.

The face vanished as quickly as it had appeared, and Nick was left with a chill on his spine and the uncertainty of whether he'd really seen it. He kept watching, but the face did not reappear. Finally he turned away. If Fowler's body was really in that pool, there was nothing he could do about it now. In fact, come to think of it, the body might serve him well later in the day.

It took him only an instant to realize how illogical that thought was. If his client was dead, there was no reason to steal the wedding doves. He would never be paid the remainder of his fee.

But if he was in that pool, someone had put him there for a reason. Had the groom lost his temper when he learned of the impending practical joke? Or was it a joke at all?

The flowers were arriving, and with them the caterer's crew. The place was a bustle of activity. Nick retreated from the pool, trying to decide on his next course of action. Something Monica had said struggled to surface in his mind, just as Fowler's face had done in the pool. But he had no time to think just then. Major Erdman was back, shouting orders to his security men. A photographer had been discovered on the plantation grounds, his camera confiscated and the man himself run off the place.

It was the groom who first expressed concern about his best man. "Where the heck is Fowler? Nobody's seen him since he checked in at eight this morning."

"I'll try to find him," Monica said, hurrying off on her mission. Nick had watched from a distance while various members of the wedding party arrived. The maid of honor was a rising Hollywood star of some renown, though her name meant nothing to Nick. The bride's family and a few other friends arrived, along with a pair of older men who proved to be her agent and business manager. A bearded Hollywood director whom Nick remembered as a recent Oscar winner was delivered to the house in a white limousine.

Through the afternoon they came, some bearing gifts but most

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apparently having dispatched them in advance. Wayne Sandked and his security men were very much in evidence and no one seemed to mind. Perhaps guards were a familiar sight at celebrity weddings. But by five-thirty, with the ceremony only a half-hour away, Russ Kona had given up on his best man ever appearing. Nick watched him scanning the rest of the wedding party for a likely substitute. Finally he called out, "Baxter! Over here!"

A short, muscular man who looked uncomfortable in his tuxedo hurried forward. Nick guessed that this was Baxter Azul, the plantation manager, who'd been scheduled for one of the readings. "What do you need, Mr. Kona?"

"You've just been promoted again. I want you for my best man."

Azul seemed pleased but surprised at the news. "Well, I'd be happy to, but what about Mr. Fowler?"

"He's among the missing and we can't wait any longer. You take the rings. All you have to do is stand there with me, and then as the minister pronounces us man and wife you open up the cage and let the doves out."

"Fine," he agreed. "I can do that."

The harpist had arrived and taken up her position, and the minister came over to chat with the groom and the new best man. Most of the two hundred chairs were already occupied, and still Nick had reached no decision about what he should do. Half the agreed fee was already in his bank account, and with his client dead he had no chance of recovering the other half. His good sense told him to walk away before the body was found and all hell broke loose. Even if he stole the doves now, what would he do with them? Fowler had wanted them released and that's what the best man would be doing anyway.

Still, he'd accepted half of the money and his deceased client deserved something for that.

The bride was beautiful, in a white lace gown that did nothing to hide the curve of her body. She took small steps down the aisle toward her smiling groom, as if wanting to prolong the pleasure of the moment. Above the canopy, Nick could hear a circling helicopter, its camera no doubt searching for some view of the proceedings. He watched it all from behind the last row of spectators, near the pool. At the proper moment he slipped into the bathhouse and searched around through the pool chemicals, towels, robes, and a couple of inexplicable VCR machines until he found and turned on the automatic pool cleaner. Almost at once he could see the orchids begin to drift toward the pool's filtering device.

He moved purposefully past the seated guests until he was only a few feet behind the best man and the cage of doves. The seconds ticked by as the minister began the ceremony. Nick allowed him-

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self a single glance back in the direction of the pool, but all eyes were on the bride and groom. It appeared that the distraction he'd hoped for would not happen in time.

Then, just as the minister pronounced them husband and wife, and Russ Kona leaned over to kiss his bride, a woman at the back of the assemblage happened to glance into the pool and let out a terrifying scream. "There's a body here!" she shouted, and all eyes were suddenly on her. Azul, who'd been reaching for the dove cage, froze in mid-motion.

Nick saw Major Erdman charging in from the other direction, and he did likewise from his side. Sandked appeared from somewhere, too, and by now half the wedding guests were on their feet seeking the cause of the commotion. It was Monica, the wedding planner, who recognized the body at once. "It's Gilbert Fowler! Get him out of there!"

"Too late for that," Sandked said, but nevertheless gave it a try. "Keep everyone away."

Before it became visible, tied to the dead man's ankle, Nick remembered the missing marble cupid Monica had mentioned. It had been enough to weight the body down, holding it just beneath the water's surface.

The ceremony had come to a standstill, and the groom himself helped hoist his friend's body from the swimming pool. When Nick saw that he could be of no help with the task, he calmly walked up front where the minister waited with Rita Madison. Neither of them gave him a second look as he picked up the ornate birdcage and carried the doves away with him.

This is for you, Fowler, he said silently as he slipped into the bathhouse with them. *And it's for half the money. I can't deliver the doves to you, so I won't charge you the other half.*

Then he slipped behind a rack of terrycloth robes to wait for the killer he knew would come.

From his hiding place Nick heard the comings and goings of police cars, with sirens filling the evening air. There was a babble of voices from the confused celebrities and other wedding guests, who were obviously being herded away from the scene. Presently he could hear the detectives questioning the men who'd pulled the body from the pool.

"We had to take him out," Wayne Sandked was arguing. "He might have been still alive."

At one point a detective opened the door of the bathhouse to peer inside, but Nick remained hidden. Apparently satisfied, the detective closed the door. After that, it was a matter of waiting. Nick knew he wouldn't be missed with all the confusion.

Finally, after about two hours, the door opened again. Nick rec-

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ognized the figure silhouetted against the outside dusk and watched while he turned on the overhead light and crossed to the half-hidden VCR machines. He ejected a tape from the top machine.

Nick stepped from his hiding place. "I knew it was you," he said. "I knew that you killed Fowler."

Major Erdman's hand dropped to his side before he remembered he wasn't wearing a gun. "Nicholas! What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you. I knew you'd come back for that tape after you killed Fowler to get it."

"What are you talking about?"

"The tape in your hand, the tape of Rita Madison's marriage to Russ Kona. I imagine the tabloids and the TV magazines will pay about a hundred grand for it, maybe more now that there's a murder involved."

"No one taped it. Our security—"

"Fowler found a way around your security. He managed to suggest the idea of releasing a pair of doves immediately after the ceremony. And he supplied an ornate cage for them, equipped with video cameras." Nick motioned toward it. "Then he hired me to steal the doves as they were being released. He said to steal the birds only, not the cage. When I suggested using a smoke bomb, he quickly vetoed that idea. The smoke would have obscured the picture."

"What are you saying? Who are you?"

"Nicholas is the only name you need to know. I assume Fowler hired me to steal the doves simply because the uproar would make a more effective video. The viewer would not only see and hear the wedding itself but the famed Rita Madison and her groom being surprised by an unexpected event. It was more than a practical joke. It was Fowler's attempt to get as much money as possible from his sale of the videotape. As it turned out, his own murder was the unexpected event."

Erdman allowed himself a slight smile, still believing he had the upper hand. "I don't see any video camera in that cage. Show me."

"These little glass spheres on the top, positioned in four directions, are the lenses of four tiny wireless cameras with built-in broadcasters. The metal tab on top of the cage is a miniature antenna for their video output. It has a range of up to one hundred feet, even through walls. But you know all that. I suspect you supplied Fowler with the cameras in the first place. Once the birdcage was in place, the operator could choose the desired camera view by remote control. But when you found out how much money was involved, you killed Fowler, hid his body under the orchids in the pool, and went for it yourself. The only trouble was, he hadn't told you about me."

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"There's no way I'm connected with this," Erdman still insisted.

"You listed Fowler's arrival this morning at five past eight, and said you saw him then. But in truth he had to have been dead long before that. You were here at four and the workmen arrived at six to set up the canopy and the rented chairs. But Fowler had to be dead and in the swimming pool by that time or surely a dozen men working around the pool would have seen what happened. Killing him, tying a statue to his ankle, and pushing him into the pool took more than a few seconds. You lied about his arrival time so you could alibi yourself for the rest of the day. I think something came to a head between you two and you killed him."

"I'll tell you what came to a head," Major Erdman growled, abandoning all pretenses. "He cut me out of it entirely, told me the profits were all his. We were out by the pool around five-thirty, just at sunrise. I knocked him down and he hit his head on that damned cupid. He was near dead anyway, so I choked the rest of the life out of him. I knew the work crew was coming early and there was no time to move the body, so I tied the statue to his leg and shoved him into the pool. Luckily the extra weight held him down, below the orchids."

"So you left the birdcage with its miniature lenses in place, choosing the best angle just before the ceremony and transmitting the whole thing to the VCR in this bathhouse. Now you've collected the tape and you'll sell it to the highest bidder."

"Damned right, I will! Think you can stop me? Go to the police with your story and they'll lock you up before me. Try to shake me down and you'll end up like Fowler." Erdman gave Nick a final triumphant smirk and walked out of the bathhouse.

When Gloria asked Nick how the wedding went, he told her the whole story. News of the murder had made the late news, of course, and he decided it was unwise to remain in Honolulu any longer. "A man like Major Erdman is capable of anything, especially when he discovers that videotape he took is blank."

"Blank?"

"I couldn't let him get away with murder, could I? I switched the wedding tape to the lower VCR and put a blank one in its place. Then I hooked the antenna up to that second machine. He made his confession right into the birdcage camera, recorded on the same tape as the wedding. My name wasn't mentioned and I tried to remain in the shadows during our conversation. I'll have the tape delivered to the police in the morning, on our way to the airport." ●

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Holmes Emerging

by Cynthia Rufty

Though some folk called his behavior atrocious,
As an infant, young Sherlock was highly precocious—
While Nanny wheeled him about in his pram,
He deduced that Bo Peep ran a shady lamb scam.
He tried to tell them Mother Goose was defective,
But who would believe in an infant detective?

When Master Holmes reached the age of four
He crayoned cyphers on his nursery door
And told his nanny, while being admonished,
That she, most surely, should not be astonished,
For he'd proven, you see, that Little Bo Peep
Had really absconded with all of those sheep.

Nanny didn't believe him, for all his high hope,
And erased his proofs with the strongest lye soap.
Some day, he vowed, they'll see through such tripe,
And he blew soap bubbles through his toy meerschaum pipe.
Then a look of enlightenment shone in his eyes—
Mary's little lamb was hot merchandise!

He perused his nursery rhymes with no reprieve
And found them all plotting the young to deceive:
Jack was indeed nimble; he had to be quick
To purloin an 18k gold candlestick—
While Dr. Foster's shower was far more than rain;
He was smuggling to Gloucester a cache of cocaine.

Little Jack Horner, young Sherlock deduced,
The plum population had sorely reduced—
And a bigamy ring thrived in St. Ives
Where each man had, indeed, seven wives,
While Jack Sprat put away more than just fat—
And hid it all in Bartholomew's hat.

Poor Rock-a-Bye Baby up on the treetop,
Shouldn't the ransom notes come to a stop?
And Hickory Dickory—there's a real crock—
It's plain to the eye he's stealing that clock.
Adults should more carefully read children's books;
They'd find 'neath their covers a minion of crooks.

Just who was the mastermind plotting these crimes,
Disguised as a goose in the nursery rhymes?
Sherlock mused and he pondered till late in the night,
Playing Hey Diddle's fiddle in search of insight—
When he saw in a flash, and then chortled with glee:
He'd tracked down the culprit—Childe Moriarty!

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A One-Minute *Hound*

by Donald A. Yates

To Baker Street hastens a doctor
A fearful tale there to unfold:
The death of Sir Charles from sheer horror,
A hound sized to make blood run cold.

Sir Henry arrives from the New World
Assuming the Baskerville line.
Mysterious hands at his lodgings
Seize boots he has put out to shine.

Commitments tie Holmes down in London,
So Watson sets off on the spoor.
To Devon, with Barrymores acting
And lights late at night on the moor.

A man of convictions named Selden
Is dogged to a terrible end.
The Stapletons both are perplexing.
Poor Watson soon misses his friend.

Lo, Holmes is not long in appearing,
Revealing his own plans to spy,
And all of the secrets and curses
He's fathomed while hidden nearby.

Sir Henry, in love, goes to dinner,
His scent now a grim kind of bait
For villain and beast as the fog swirls
When homeward he strolls from his date.

The climax is properly chilling,
When Holmes his revolver must fire,
Destroying the hound, while its master
Escapes to his grave—Grimpen Mire.

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

The Born Natural

by Brynn Bonner

Another beach vacation. Another interminable week of watching Lloyd wallow in a beach chair sipping tall drinks, heavy with rum, topped off with paper umbrellas; and reading Tom Clancy novels, heavy with convoluted plots, topped off with techno-babble. He could do that right here, poolside, at their suburban Atlanta home, couldn't he?

"Well, Lloyd, that sounds really nice," Betsey said, her spun-sugar drawl registering a slight whine, "but can't we do something just a teensy bit different this year? I just feel like I'm withering on the vine. I was hoping we could do something a little more—well—*involved,* this year."

"What do you mean, 'involved'?" Lloyd asked, eyeing her suspiciously.

"Well, just look at these brochures I've got here," she plowed ahead, waving an array of colorful brochures fanned out like a hand of playing cards.

Lloyd rolled his eyes and turned to fill his mug from the Mr. Coffee machine. "Betsey, you know how I feel about this. Vacations are

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meant for relaxing, not for running around DOING things. I just want to get out to Hilton Head and kick back for a few days."

"Oh, but Lloyd, just look at these," Betsey implored. She felt a sense of desperation coming over her and struggled to keep her voice from rising a full octave. Betsey's mother, ever the Southern lady, had taught her you catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar, which raised the question in Betsey's mind of why you'd want to catch flies in the first place. But still, early training stays with you.

Brynn Bonner is the pseudonym of a Cary, NC, writer who won the Robert L. Fish Award of 1998 for her story "Clarity," published in *EQMM*. The author has an M.A. in journalism and has worked as a reporter and as a high school and college teacher. This is her third story for *EQMM* since her 1998 debut. She has also recently completed a novel which we hope will soon see print.

She got herself under control and purred. "Just look at them, Hon. We could go on this one, it's an eco-vacation to the rain forest of Borneo. You don't have to hike or anything. They give you a gourmet picnic lunch when you arrive and you stay at this wonderful resort at the end of the day called the Riverside Lodge. Then, in the morning, you go on a cruise down this river on a glass-enclosed boat to look for the proboscis monkey. That's the one with the Jimmy Durante nose, you know?" She demonstrated by pulling at her own perky little upturned nose. "And they have the world's biggest flower there. It's called the rafflesia," she said, stumbling over the word. "Wouldn't you love to see that, Lloyd?"

Lloyd, looking singularly unimpressed by talk of big-nosed monkeys and giant flowers, gulped his coffee and wolfed down a marmalade-laden slice of toast.

"Or look at this one, it's a cruise—that's almost like the beach—it's a theme cruise called 'Adrift in History' where you dress up in period costumes for dinner each evening. One night it's Elizabethan England, the next night is Colonial America, then Antebellum, then the Twenties. Look at this little flapper costume, isn't that the cutest?"

Lloyd sighed heavily and rubbed his forehead as if massaging away his troubles—Betsey being tops on that list right at the moment. Betsey knew she was losing him, but she plunged ahead before he had a chance to shut her down. "Or here, look at this one." She plucked a brochure from her hand and unfolded it onto the kitchen counter. "It's my favorite. It's a mystery weekend at a

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bed and breakfast up in New England. You know, it's one of those things where you each play a part and you reenact a murder mystery. Doesn't that sound like fun?"

"I don't want FUN on my vacation," Lloyd said through clenched teeth. "I want to relax and just BE. I work hard all year, Betsey. I just want a week of peace and quiet. Nowhere to go, no one to see, nothing to DO!" He looked down into Betsey's crestfallen face. It looked like it might fracture into a thousand tiny pieces and fall off her head onto the floor, plinking on the tiles like so many pieces of teacup porcelain. His voice softened. "We can do one of your activity things on a weekend sometime," he said, placing his empty coffee mug on top of the pile of brochures with a thump of finality. "I promise, some other time. Soon."

He bent down and deposited a fleeting kiss on her forehead. She leaned against the counter and stared wistfully at his receding Brooks Brothers suit as he grabbed his briefcase and started for the door. "Don't wait dinner, I've got a proposal due tomorrow and I'll be at the office late," he said, not bothering to look back in her direction.

Betsey began to clear away the breakfast dishes, a feeling of hopelessness settling over her. She truly felt as if she was just going to dry up and fly away if something didn't happen in her life soon. She was so tired of the same routine, the same ordered, measured life.

She knew she had it good by the standards of three-quarters of the world's population. Okay, maybe more, but those other fractions—seven-eighths, eleven-sixteenths, and like that—were too confusing. She never could figure out which one was more! Just say she had it better than almost ALL of the people in the world, she'd concede that. Lloyd made a good living, which meant that she didn't need to work—which she had not one whit of ambition to do. And she had no children to demand her attentions. Some of her friends pitied her for her childless condition. And she let them, even though she'd actually been relieved when Lloyd had said he didn't want children. She didn't think of herself as mother material—it was such a messy undertaking. But she knew her friends would see that as unnatural for a woman, so she let them pity her, and she let them blame Lloyd.

They had a lovely home in one of the nicer of Atlanta's areas, which she had decorated and redecorated until she could no longer bear the sight of a wallpaper sample book. She had a housekeeper, Carlotta, who came in three days a week, a gardener to take care of the grounds, and a pool boy to take care of the pool and occasionally wash the cars.

When her restlessness had first begun to afflict her, she had exhausted the roster of outreach classes at the local art center—

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floral arrangement, jewelry-making, watercolor painting, and, in one ill-fated burst of enthusiasm, French cooking. This choice had resulted in a tremendous expenditure for the proper pans and utensils and a twenty-pound weight gain for her and a thirty-pound pile-on for Lloyd. This had led to her next preoccupation—Jazzercise. She had quickly lost her twenty pounds and had become so enamored with the whole thing she'd become an instructor. But she'd quickly become bored with it, and the Jazzercise tapes and exercise clothes got tossed into the closet along with the watercolor paints, silk flowers, beads, and wire whisks. The only thing they had to show for all her efforts was the thirty-pound spare tire Lloyd still carried around his middle.

Betsey stacked the brochures neatly at the end of the counter and sighed. Oh well, time for shopping therapy. Dora would be here to pick her up soon. They'd spend the morning salving her disappointment with a flurry of conspicuous consumption. If she was going to spend a week in Hilton Head lounging by the pool, she'd damn well look gorgeous doing it! After heating up all her credit cards, she and Dora would have a nice lunch at that little sidewalk cafe they liked in underground Atlanta, then Dora would take her to pick up her car. The dealership was all the way across the city, which made Lloyd grumble every time the car had to be taken in for service. It had been Betsey who had insisted on a Peugeot. It was her statement, her way of being different amidst the sea of Mercedes, BMWs, Volvos, and Lexi? (what in the world was the plural of Lexus anyway?) in the neighborhood. It was a small thing, but a woman had to find a way to express her personal style, after all. So Betsey had taken on the responsibility of taking the car in. And her best friend Dora usually followed her out to leave the car, creating a naturally occurring shopping opportunity. Then, taking her back a few days later to pick the car up, creating yet another one. A sort of ebb and flow, like the tides, except pulled by the Galleria, not the moon. So Dora didn't mind taking her out there—really, she'd told her so a thousand times. Like Lloyd, Dora's husband, Stephen, was very successful. And, like Lloyd, he was always busy, busy. Their only child was away at boarding school. Dora, too, had lots of hours to fill.

The shopping bags filled the trunk when they transferred them to the Peugeot at the dealership. Dora laughed and clucked her tongue in a mock scold as the evidence of Betsey's extravagance mounted. "Darlin', you are a black-belt shopper, I'll give you that," she said to Betsey as the last bag had to be diverted to the back seat.

"What can I say? I'm a born natural," Betsey replied as she gave Dora a reserved little hug, careful not to muss either of their hair

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or makeup. "Thank you for bringing me out to get the car. You're a doll."

A few air kisses and a little see-you-soon chatter later and Betsey was on her way out of the industrial pod toward a surface street. The shopping high was wearing off and she was again feeling a sense of let-down about next month's vacation. As she rounded a tight curve she saw the gates coming down at the railroad crossing ahead. Drat! She'd wanted to get home and get the shopping bags inside before Lloyd got home.

If only Dora hadn't dallied about so long at the dealership they'd have missed the train. But Dora had gotten it into her head that maybe she ought to have a Peugeot, too. She'd sat in each model and adjusted and readjusted things just like she did when they were trying on clothes. But it was a little difficult to bring a car back if it didn't fit, so Dora had given each one very careful consideration. And she had taken forever and two weeks, Betsey thought now, to make her way around the showroom. She'd said several times that she had to get on home, and kept looking at her watch, but then she'd have just "one more little question" which would set the salesman off on another wind-up pitch. But Betsey hadn't really been in a position to grumble. After all, Dora was doing her a favor by bringing her out here.

Betsey braked to a stop at the gate and craned her neck to see if she could see the end of the train. No caboose in sight. She sat there serenely for a few minutes, her hands folded demurely in her lap as the train's cars rocked by in a steady rhythm. She twisted in her seat and waved to Dora, whose Volvo wagon was directly behind her. Betsey hunched her shoulders up and opened her palms in a "What's a person to do?" gesture, then turned back around and put the car into park and took her sandaled foot off the brake. She scootched forward and put her face as close to the windshield as she could get it and tried to see down the tracks. Still no end in sight. Call Guinness! Betsey thought, this has to be the longest train in the history of the railroad! She sighed heavily, pulled a nail file from her purse, and went to work, smoothing a spot on her thumbnail. She'd definitely have to have a manicure before they left for Hilton Head. Maybe she'd get acrylics. She put the file back and began drumming her fingers on the steering wheel, mesmerized by the clack, clack of the cars passing in front of her. The train seemed to be slowing. Tank cars, Norfolk & Western, coal cars, Mid Iowa Corp, boxcars. Lumber, gravel, phosphoric acid, big metal boxes used for—who knew what!

Then a boxcar, its doors open, passed by and changed Betsey's life forever and always in one fleeting moment. A horrifying image burned onto Betsey's retinas. Two men were framed in the open doorway. One standing, the other lying prone. The upright man

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turned as the train passed in front of her and stared in at her through the windshield. In his hand he held a large black gun. The man on the floor of the boxcar was covered in something liquid and red—blood, it had to be, though it wasn't as red as it was in the movies. It was more like a burgundy. The gunman's coal-black eyes bore in on her as she sat immobile, her fingers suspended in midair above the steering wheel, stone-cold fear having frozen them in mid-drum.

The train continued on down the track and Betsey struggled to make herself move. She wasn't sure how long she sat there in this ice-bound state. But finally her muscles unclenched and she flung open the door of the Peugeot and ran back to Dora's car, stuttering and waving her hands about as if she were being pursued by a swarm of severely hacked-off hornets. "Did you see that?" she shrieked as Dora rolled down the window, her questioning smile being replaced by a frown of concern as she got a good look at Betsey's face.

"See what?" Dora asked, putting her head out the window and looking in the direction of the train crossing.

"No, not there. They're way down there now," Betsey said, waving wildly at the boxcar now well down the track. "He killed him. Didn't you see those guys? One was dead—or getting dead—the other had a gun. You had to have seen them," Betsey said, now jumping up and down a little.

"I didn't see anything," Dora replied, looking around confusedly. "What are you talking about?" She was looking harder at her friend now, and Betsey was getting even more agitated. How could she not have seen it? It was right there in front of her, for God's sake!

The caboose passed, rocking gently from side to side as it lumbered through the crossing, and the gates began to rise. Drivers lined up behind Dora started to toot genteelly on their horns. Betsey raised her arms and shouted back at them, "What is the matter with you people? Didn't anybody see those men?"

She was answered by a new round of serious honking, and one man rolled his window down and leaned his head out. "Let's move it, Sister-Woman. We'd all like to get home before happy hour expires! Move your car!"

Dora twisted around and waved to him to settle down. "Betsey, just get in the car. Go down to the Piggly-Wiggly parking lot and pull over and you can tell me what you think you saw," she said.

What she thought she saw? Betsey fumed as she drove the half-mile to the parking lot. She knew very well what she'd seen. She'd seen a murder, or a close aftermath. She shivered a little as she cut the engine, thinking of the gunman's black eyes boring into

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her. His face, especially those intense eyes, hovered in front of her like a bumptious poltergeist.

After recounting the story to Dora she implored, "Didn't you see anything? They were right there, right in that open boxcar. I don't understand how you could have missed it." Betsey held both hands out wide and shook her head as if to clear it.

"I'm sorry," Dora said, holding her own hands out in echo. "I was fiddling with the radio for a little bit." She frowned in concentration. "And then I was rummaging around in my bag for the receipt for that skirt I bought." She paused again, the frown wrinkle deepening between her delicate brows. "I'm thinking I might take that back and get black instead of navy. Don't you think that would go better with that mauve blouse?"

Betsey looked at her friend incredulously. "I don't know, and at this particular minute I could not possibly care one t-nincy bit less, Dora. I just told you that I witnessed a murder and you're talking to me about clothes?"

"You're right. Of course, you're right," Dora said with a nervous little laugh and gave Betsey an exaggerated wink.

Betsey had the fleeting notion that she heard the *Twilight Zone* theme playing in her head. Had Dora actually winked? Yes, she'd actually winked. What was wrong with her? With those people at the crossing? With everybody? Betsey wondered as she stared at her friend slack-jawed.

Dora became somber. "I'm sorry. That was inappropriate. I'm just flustered, I guess. I don't know what we're supposed to do, do you?"

Betsey thought for a minute. "I guess I go to the police, but which ones? Or do I call the railway? Do they have their own police or what—what do they do if a crime is committed on a train that's moving from place to place? Who has—what do you call it? Right of way?"

"You mean jurisdiction?" Dora asked. "I don't know who has it, Betsey. I've never been in this position before." She thought for a minute, then snapped her fingers. "I know what we'll do," she said decisively. "My cousin Reed works at a substation pretty close to here. He's a city cop. We'll go over to see him and he'll tell us what we need to do. You come get in my car. You're too upset to drive."

Dora's cousin Reed took Betsey's story seriously and had her go over it two or three times. He scribbled furiously into his little notebook, then told Betsey to go home, assured her he'd take care of everything, then went out and hopped into his cruiser and sped away, lights flashing.

Dora insisted on following Betsey all the way home and waiting with her until Lloyd came home. Then she left her in his capable

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hands and breezed out the door with a lighthearted, "Tootles, I'll call tomorrow."

Betsey spilled the whole story to Lloyd in one continuous twisted rope of words, barely stopping for breath, and not bothering with syntax or context. He responded with soothing sounds, which, to Betsey's irritation, reminded her of the way old ladies talked to their poodles. He mixed her a screwdriver, a little heavy on the vodka, and brought her a wet cloth to put on her head, then suggested that they order in Chinese for dinner. Betsey wasn't sure he had his priorities straight, but the screwdriver, at least, was having a calming effect.

Reed called her the next morning. She was restless and jumpy after a poor night's sleep. He informed her that the train had been stopped and thoroughly searched. In addition, the trackside had been searched for a twenty-mile stretch, ten miles on either side of the crossing. Nothing had turned up. "They paid special attention to the boxcars, but only two were empty, and both of them were clean as a whistle and padlocked from the outside. I don't know what to tell you," Reed said. The tone of his voice let Betsey know his interest had cooled to lukewarm since yesterday. "Maybe you just misinterpreted something you saw. You know those cars move past pretty fast and maybe you just saw a couple of workers doing something and your imagination filled in the rest."

Betsey bristled. "I most certainly did NOT imagine anything," she said fiercely. "I saw what I saw. One man had a large REAL gun—I don't know what kind. I don't know guns, but it was big and black, and most definitely NOT imaginary! The guy who was down on the floor had blood—a LOT of blood—on his shirt and all over the floor. That's not any kind of railroad work I can think of!"

"Yes, ma'am," said Reed noncommittally. "I hear what you're saying. We'll keep after it. If anything new turns up we'll let you know."

Right, Betsey thought as she hung up. I can just tell how long your interest in this is going to last!—about seven nanoseconds if she was lucky!

But, as it happened, like watercolors and French cooking, Betsey's own interest in the case began to wane after a few days. By the end of the next week she was beginning to wonder if she had imagined it. Part of her knew she hadn't, but it was so surreal and she had only gotten that brief glance. And, after all, it had nothing to do with her. If Dora really was going to take back that navy skirt, she might as well go with her and get that turquoise silk sleeveless blouse. It would look stunning on her tanned skin, which she'd have ample time to work on during the lounging hours of Lloyd's dream vacation.

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The boxcar incident was a closed issue in Betsey's mind when she stopped by the dry cleaner's to pick up two of Lloyd's suits and her favorite linen coatdress. Lloyd had insisted that he needed his gray suit and that the errand couldn't wait until tomorrow when she and Dora were going out anyway. He thought all she had to do all day was run around on his errands. Well, actually, that was all she had to do today, but still, she felt put-upon.

She was trying to be positive about the upcoming vacation. There would be some good shopping and there were some lovely restaurants in Hilton Head. Betsey wasn't much of a reader, but she'd purchased a portable CD player and several CDs to listen to, and she'd pick up a bagful of fashion magazines. She'd make it work.

She fished in her oversized Coach bag for her claim stub for the dry cleaning—without success. "Oh Henry, I can't find my stub. But you know me, for heaven's sake, we've been coming here for ten years. Can you just get my things? Lloyd's got two suits and I've got an ecru linen dress."

Henry, a bald, middle-aged man who seemed to have been born tired and suffered a relapse, sighed heavily and trudged to the back room. "It'll take me a few minutes to find them without the number on the stub," he said mournfully.

Betsey tried to neaten the contents of her purse, then picked up a flyer from the counter and started to fan herself. She glanced through the doorway where Henry had disappeared and suddenly she felt as if her breath had been vacuumed from her body. A slight young man was working at the steam presser in the back. He was wearing a baseball cap, and as he raised up he pulled it from his head and wiped his brow with his sleeve. It was the gunman from the boxcar. Betsey was sure of it. After this fact came to her, its corollary skipped along behind—she had no idea what to do about it! Should she scream? Should she run? Should she call for Henry? The young man looked at her and frowned, cocking his head to one side as if trying to remember something, then his face hardened. He put his cap back on, turned from the presser, and headed toward the back. Betsey stood frozen in place.

She was holding herself across the middle and keening softly when Henry came from the back holding hangers high in his hands, clothing draped over his arms so that the dry cleaner's plastic trailed down like a waterfall. "Found 'em. Two suits, one dress." He pulled the tickets from the hangers and started to punch the cash register keys as if the job was taking his last ounce of strength.

"Henry," Betsey finally managed, her voice sounding like a squeak in her own ears, "that man who was working at the pressing machine. Who is he?" She lowered her voice even more and

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tried to stretch over the counter to peek into the back room. "And where did he go?"

Henry looked at her curiously and then glanced around the door jamb himself. "Oh, that's Tony. He's just hired on. Does a good job."

"Henry, he's dangerous. He's a killer!" she said slowly. "I saw him kill someone—well, I practically saw it. It's the same man. I know it is."

Henry looked at her and smiled uncertainly. "Is this a joke? Is there a camera hidden somewhere?" he said, looking all around the shop and grinning.

"Henry, it's not a joke. For pity's sake," Betsey said, gritting her teeth and speaking fast and low. "You can't stay in here with him. We've got to go outside and call the police."

Henry put his head around the door jamb again. "Well, I—Well, durn it! For one reason or another he's gone. Back door to the alley's wide open." He turned back to Betsey and sighed heavily. "You suppose he's flown the coop? Daggone it! He was a good worker, I hate to lose him."

"He's—a—killer!" Betsey said, hammering each word at him. "What part of that don't you get? Honestly!" she said, now digging in her purse for Reed's card. She found it and picked up Henry's phone, not bothering to ask permission, and punched in the number.

Reed came at once and searched the alley behind the building. Then, finding no sign of the dark-eyed man, he interviewed both Betsey and Henry. Betsey said her piece in a rapid-fire recitation, priding herself on staying calm. But as Henry's interview began, Betsey became irked by Henry's description of this Tony guy—this Tony-the-Killer guy, Betsey thought—as a nice, polite young man. Didn't he get what she was telling him? Didn't he believe her? she wanted to know. This time her voice made the full octave leap. She was no longer remotely interested in catching flies.

"Well," Henry said slowly, "all I know is he hadn't given me any trouble at all. He says he's just been down here a couple of weeks. Down from New Jersey, I believe it was."

Reed continued to write in his little notebook, and then the two men sighed in unison.

Betsey picked up her Coach bag and stomped out the door, leaving the dry cleaning—and the two useless men—behind.

As soon as she was in the car she pushed the lock button and plucked her cell phone out of its holder, punching in Lloyd's number. His response to her recounting of the morning's events was, "Now Bets, don't get your Victoria's Secrets in a twist. You told me yourself, you only saw the guy for a minute. It was probably just somebody who reminded you of him."

Betsey disconnected without responding. She wished she'd been

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on a regular phone. She missed the satisfying feeling of slamming the receiver down. She started the car, her eyes scanning the doorways up and down the street. Had the dark-eyed man recognized her? He had seemed to be studying her face. Had he remembered her from the railroad crossing? She shivered a little and eased the car into the flow of street traffic. She wondered how easy it was for someone to learn your identity, your name, and—Oh my God, your address—from your license plates. It always seemed really easy in the detective movies. Would the gunman be able to find her?

Betsey's mouth was dry. Her tongue felt Velcroed to the roof of her mouth. She'd never felt this vulnerable before. Suddenly she was very grateful for the security system Lloyd had insisted on installing at the house. Until now she'd been very lax about setting the alarm. It was such a nuisance, and all those numbers gave her a headache. But now, with those dark eyes seared into her memory, she wished Lloyd had added a moat full of alligators around the house.

She was reconsidering the gun issue, too. When Lloyd had come home with the Glock, she had pitched a conniption fit. She didn't even want the thing in the house. And when Lloyd had pressured her to go to the range and learn to shoot it, she had dug in her heels and flatly refused. Heretofore, nothing Lloyd had to say about self-defense or home security had any effect on her. But now she saw his point in sharp relief.

She pressed the accelerator and aimed the Peugeot in a beeline for home. When she pulled into her own driveway she glanced nervously about, suddenly aware of all the hiding places the trees and bushes of their prized landscaping provided. She pressed the garage door opener and felt her heart thudding in her chest. The gunman's dark eyes seemed to be peering out at her from behind Lloyd's long-abandoned weight bench. She scurried to the door and let herself into the house, her breath now coming in little short puffs. She reset the alarm and stood at the kitchen counter, willing herself to breathe normally. She filled a glass of water—straight from the tap, no time to locate the Perrier in the fridge—and drank it down in three long gulps.

Time for a plan. She didn't like this. Not one bit. This was just no way to live. She strode with purpose to the master bedroom, threw some water on her face in her black-tiled bathroom, and wiped her face on one of the salmon-colored towels it had taken her so long to find. These were normally off limits for actual use. They were show towels, but that seemed pretty inconsequential right now. She drew a deep shuddering breath and went into the bedroom, smoothing the Laura Ashley comforter as she sat on the edge of the bed on Lloyd's side.

The gun was interesting, once you got over the hardware aspects

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of it. She'd found the keys where Lloyd kept them taped under the lamp base on the nightstand. Lloyd was nothing if not a responsible gun owner. The Glock was locked in a metal box in the nightstand drawer. It also featured a trigger lock, which she had no idea how to disengage. She put it back in the box and put the whole apparatus into a gym bag, put the keys in her handbag, and went back out to the Peugeot, forcing herself to move quickly and with purpose.

Betsey had been going to the range every day for two weeks and Rick said she was a born natural. Today he was going to help her work on her shooter's stance. She'd definitely gotten over her distaste for guns. She was becoming very proficient, and it gave her a boost. She felt much safer—very confident, very Annie Oakley.

It was really nice of Rick to give her so much time and attention at the shooting range, Betsey thought. She decided she'd stop by and pick up some coffee and pastries to take along this morning as a thank-you gesture. She pulled into a parking space at her favorite storefront bakery and dashed in, eager to be on her way. Despite her newfound confidence, it still made her feel a little nervous to be out in the open like this.

That sweet little blond girl was working behind the counter today. Betsey picked two apple fritters for Rick and a carrot muffin for herself. As the girl packaged her choices, Betsey started to examine herself in the reflection of the glass-fronted cases that housed coffee makers, mugs, and other specialty items behind the bakery case. Her chin-length, better-living-through-chemistry blond hair needed a trim and a touch-up. She reached up and picked at her bangs, idly wondering if Reynaldo (who she happened to know was really just plain old Ronald Dawkins!) could fit her in today. Suddenly she seized, every cell locked. Dark eyes peered in at her from the street window. She willed herself to turn and stare at the man who was peering in, his hands cupped at the glass. She was at once frightened and puzzled. Something was wrong. His hair was red, not dark, not right. But the eyes. The man put his head down and yanked a baseball cap from his jeans pocket, jamming it on his head and pulling it low over his brow. As he turned to walk away he gave a backward glance. It was most definitely him. It was the gunman. Never mind the red hair. Those eyes, it was HIM!

Betsey's breath became ragged and she felt her Annie Oakley persona running for the hills. Her eyes darted around the bakery and she made for the door, then hesitated.

"Is something wrong, ma'am?" the little blond girl asked.

"No—yes. Yes, something's wrong!" Betsey said, her voice sounding strangely squeezed and diluted. "Can you call this number for

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me?" she asked, handing the girl Reed's card. "Ask him to come over right now. I'm just going to sit over here and—just sit over here," she said, her voice now sing-songing. She sat down tentatively on a plastic chair, then abruptly lowered her head between her legs and started to whimper.

Reed had been very sympathetic when he'd arrived a short time later. But his nods became less frequent and encouraging and his tone more condescending as he listened to Betsey's story. Eventually he put his notebook away. "Now, let me make sure I've got this straight, you say he had red hair this time?" he asked for the third time.

Betsey recognized a patronizing tone when she heard one. God knew she heard it enough at home. "Yes, he had red hair," she said firmly. "But it WAS the same man, the one I saw on the train and at the dry cleaner's."

"Okay," Reed said, drawing the word out and serving up a big sigh to go along with it. "I'll fill out a report. In the meantime, you keep an eye out and be careful."

Betsey looked at him in disbelief. What did he think she'd do? Go hang out in a dark alley, blissfully unaware, with this maniac stalking her? "Yes, I'll definitely keep an eye out," she said, sugar drawl giving over completely to tart, "and thanks so much for your help and protection."

"Any time, ma'am," Reed said, tipping his hat. Didn't they teach these guys to recognize sarcasm when they heard it in that police school? Betsey wondered.

The next time he was a blond. This sighting came at her tennis club. He was playing doubles on the court next to hers. She got just a glimpse of him on the opposite side of the court. But it was him. She knew it was him.

This time she didn't bother calling anyone. She knew what she knew and it didn't matter what anyone else thought about it. She was on her own. But that was okay. The gun was in her gym bag.

"A fifteenth anniversary needs to be celebrated right!" Lloyd had said at breakfast. "We'll have a party. You won't have to do a thing. I'll make the arrangements with the caterer and get Carlotta to work two extra days this week to get the house ready. All you'll have to do is relax and enjoy it! It'll be just the thing to get you out of this mood."

Betsey bristled at the suggestion that she was in "a mood," but knew it was pointless to argue with Lloyd once he had his mind set on something. And anyway, a party would be fun. She'd get to plan the theme for it and pick out decorations and all.

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But Betsey knew—had a firm conviction—that something would happen at this party. Something that would bring everything to a close. She'd been doing a little investigating of her own, since the police couldn't—or wouldn't. She now knew some things about the dark-eyed man in the boxcar. And she knew he'd end up here, sooner or later.

So many opportunities at a party. Their house would be open. Their friends would all be there decked out in their finest. There would be a lot of service people coming and going. It would be the perfect opportunity for someone so inclined to execute a plan. *Well, the party it'll be, then,* she thought. *I'll be ready!*

The house looked beautiful. Carlotta had really outdone herself. The pool area was decorated in a Polynesian motif with torches and coconut and pineapple centerpieces like she and Lloyd had enjoyed so much on their honeymoon to Hawaii. Guests arrived in good spirits. Everyone was laughing and talking and looking fabulous. Betsey felt truly wonderful herself, every cell tingling. The heft of the gun concealed in the pocket of her loose pants served as a constant reminder to her that she was in charge here, no matter what. The dark-eyed man was waiting for just the right time, she knew it. She felt it! Well, so was she!

She spotted him early on in the evening. His hair was back to its original dark brown. He was dressed in the caterer's black pants and white shirt. His hair was neatly trimmed and he sported a small, neat moustache. As if that would fool anyone! She watched his every move, all the while laughing and talking with friends as if nothing at all unusual was happening, but she was careful never to let him out of sight or allow him to get behind her. It was like a strange sort of choreography.

Lloyd must have asked her a hundred times through the course of the evening if she was okay, and now went for a hundred and one as she gazed at the young man circling the patio with a drink tray. Lloyd seemed surprised when she appeared to be very much okay. He searched her face intently and seemed perplexed by the shift in her attitude. "Oh, I'm having a perfectly wonderful time, Lloyd. I'm so happy you suggested this."

"Well, that's good," Lloyd said hesitantly, now looking around the patio himself, seeming to take over the paranoia patrol where Betsey had left off.

The pseudo waiter made his way around to their side of the room. He stopped in front of them, keeping his eyes down, and Betsey picked up a drink from the tray and said, "Thank you—oh, I'm sorry, what was your name again?"

"Emilio, ma'am," the man muttered, his eyes still studying his

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shiny black shoes. He held the tray out to Lloyd, who shook his head and gestured with the half-empty glass in his hand.

As he moved away Betsey stared after him and Lloyd asked again, "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes, Lloyd, I'm absolutely sure I'm okay. And I'm going to stay okay," she said, allowing her hand to feel the reassuring shape of the gun through her pants leg.

About an hour into the party, Carlotta, whom Lloyd had engaged to supervise the caterers, came out to summon Betsey to the kitchen to take a phone call. Betsey's mother never failed to call on their anniversary, hadn't missed a single time in fifteen years. This year she was vacationing in Greece.

"Well, how do you like that, Lloyd?" Betsey said. "Even halfway around the world, Mother's still thinking of us on our anniversary. Isn't that the sweetest thing?"

When she picked up the receiver, Betsey found nothing but a dial tone. Turning, she found herself alone in the room with him. At last. Their eyes met—his almost black, hers a steely blue—and locked. This was it, then. Time. Well, she was ready. The hand in her pants pocket curled around the trigger.

The report of the gunshot resounded over the patio and the party chatter immediately subsided, like a jungle gone quiet after a lion's roar. The guests looked around at one another for a moment, confused, then began to move about like short-circuited bumper cars, careening into one another, not knowing where to go, but certain they should move.

Lloyd burst into the kitchen, followed by Dora and Stephen, and a trailing audience that wedged into the doorway. "Betsey, what have you done?" Lloyd shouted, staring at his wife, who was standing over the man stretched out on the kitchen floor, his white shirt now sporting a red flowering splotch.

Betsey looked up, her eyes at once mystified and defiant. "It's the man from the railroad car. It's the killer. No one would believe me! I had to do it, don't you see? I had to. He would have gotten to me eventually." She looked at Lloyd pleadingly.

Lloyd stared at the figure, shaking his head from side to side, murmuring, "Oh Geez, Oh Geez! What's come over you, Betsey? What have you done?" Then he began to sputter and—burst into laughter! Betsey frowned and looked back down at the man, who hadn't moved so much as a twitch, and then back at Lloyd, who was now chuckling gleefully.

"Why are you laughing?" Betsey demanded. "Have you lost your mind? I shot this man. He may be dead. He was after me. He wanted to kill me. What do you find funny about that?" Betsey demanded, her eyes wide and wild.

"You can get up now, Albert," Lloyd said, bending over the

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recumbent man, who stayed put. "This is a friend of mine, Albert Arnette," Lloyd said, as he stood up and choked back a laugh. "If you could see your face!" he said, pointing to Betsey and starting to laugh again. "Albert's an actor. You said you wanted an adventure. I figured I could give you one better than any New England B and B. The whole thing was a setup, Betsey. I started working on it weeks ago when Dora told me how you'd latched on to this idea! But now you've gone and ruined it! You were supposed to find him here in the kitchen, 'dead.'" He framed the word with big quotation marks with his big meaty hands and then pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his eyes. "The rest of the party was going to be spent trying to figure out whodunit! You know, like your fancy mystery weekend. But you've gone and taken the mystery out of it, haven't you?"

Betsey looked to the man, who continued to play his part, lying still on the floor. "A setup?" she asked, her voice quivering.

"Yeah, the whole thing. The train—by the way, that took some timing, didn't it, Dora?" he asked, hugging Dora around her shoulders as she too now stared at the man on the floor. "The 'stalking,'" Lloyd continued, drawing the big quotation marks in the air again—and again dissolving into laughter. " 'Course, I didn't know you'd haul off and shoot him. But just as an added precaution, I replaced all the ammo in the house with blanks. I figured I'd better play it safe since you've been so jumpy lately. So, what do you say? This enough adventure for you?" he asked, his eyes still dancing. "I was gonna let you in on it tonight. We were going to act it all out. But you've jumped the gun, so to speak." He chuckled again.

"Oh, Lloyd," Betsey said, tears welling up in her eyes and overflowing onto her ghostly white cheeks. "Oh no," she said slowly, looking down at Albert, still unmoving on the kitchen floor. "Oh NO," she wailed, dropping the gun onto the clay-tiled kitchen floor.

Lloyd's smile faded and he looked from Betsey to the gun on the floor and then to Albert. He frowned. "What?" he said, now uneasy. He crossed the room and knelt. "Come on, Al, the jig's up. No more theatrics."

"Lloyd," Betsey said, pointing to the shiny, pearl-handled Smith and Wesson. "The Glock was such an ugly thing, so big and clunky. I bought this one. It's so much prettier," she said, the tears now falling freely. "I bought my own ammo. I was going to take you to the range and show you how well I was doing. It was going to be a surprise. Oh, Lloyd," she said, looking down into his ashen face as he knelt beside the unmoving man. "Oh God," she choked, clapping both hands over her mouth as she stared down at an unmoving Albert.

Lloyd was getting just the kind of vacation he liked. Total relaxation. Except he wasn't at Hilton Head. He was sitting beside his

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own pool, recovering nicely from the mild coronary he'd had that night in the kitchen.

As for Betsey, she'd hired a full-time nurse to see after him during his recovery, and she herself looked in on him a couple of times a day when she could and kept in touch by phone.

Poor Lloyd. Hoisted by his own petard. Of course, Betsey would never have gone to such lengths if she'd known Lloyd was gonna up and have a heart attack, but after all, he was the one who'd started them down this path.

Albert had been more than willing to fill her in on every detail of Lloyd's little plan the day she'd put the gun into his ribs in the tennis-club parking lot, crazed with fear by the man she believed was stalking her. Once he'd gotten over the shock of having a loaded gun aimed at him by a very frightened, very tense, very serious-looking woman, he'd hurriedly spilled the whole story. He'd been very upset to learn that Lloyd had not let her in on the little mystery scenario they were acting out. He had assumed they were all working from the same script. A performance piece where everyone knew what was what. After their little chat, she and Albert had gone to Dora, Stephen, and Reed, and other minor players, who were also laboring under the illusion that everyone was in on the script.

It had seemed only fair to turn the tables on Lloyd. Who knew he couldn't take it as well as he dished it out?

Betsey checked the watch tucked under the sleeve of her costume and hung up the phone. According to Nurse Ratched, Lloyd was having a good afternoon and was currently napping in the chaise longue, a Tom Clancy novel lying open on his chest.

"Well, that's fine then," Betsey said breezily. "If I'm not home by nine I'll check in again."

Betsey signaled the director that she'd be right there and took a drink of water from the bottle on her chair. After a final inspection by the wardrobe mistress, Dora, who straightened the clasp on her necklace and brushed lint from the bodice of her high-necked dress, Betsey headed for the stage. Dora was loving the job of handling wardrobe. Everyone marveled at what she'd been able to accumulate—much of it from her own closet.

As one of the leads, Betsey was in almost every scene. They were in final rehearsals at the local playhouse for a production of *Arsenic and Old Lace,* set to begin its run next weekend.

"Okay, places, everyone," the director called. Albert was waiting on stage at his mark. He gave her a full-throttled smile and beckoned to her. Albert had been the one to talk her into auditioning for the production. "You've got to do it," he'd said, his dark eyes flashing. "I mean, for heaven's sake, you're a born natural!" ●

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Mystery Express

by Jay Alter

Rushing through the night on a northbound train
Requires whiskey and soda and a mystery book.
By chapter two the handsome stranger with the look
Of tragic betrayal must kiss the lady of noble birth
Or wait, the diamond necklace worth
A million pounds sterling disappears
And Lady Katherine faints and fears
For her handsome lover's life.
He, an orphaned veteran who was falsely accused,
Beaten, shot, left for dead, and badly used
By his best chum, an Oxford grad
Who it turns out is a bit of a cad.
Now the lover waits on a distant shore,
Bruised, lonely, heartsick, and sore.
Or wait, he's atop the cliffs of Dover, arms open wide
As brave Lady Katherine rushes to his side,
Driving her red roadster through the pouring rain.
Or wait, there's a fog and she searches in vain
For the man she loves who's been struck on the head
By his younger sister Beth,
An eighteen-year-old beauty with absinthe on her breath
And a murderous intent in her black and evil heart.
She's got the necklace, the roadster, and a good head start.
But Lady Katherine finds her lover at Dead Man's Ridge
And they cut off Beth's escape by crossing Bailey Bridge.
There they watch in horror as Beth takes a dive
In her jaunty green jalopy that she could barely drive.
Or wait, the Chief Inspector finds the missing loot
In the evil Oxford grad's shiny riding boot.
Lady Katherine and her lover wed in joyful bliss,
Drink champagne, nibble cake, and kiss and kiss and kiss.
Or wait, two strangers meet on a midnight train
Rushing through the night in the pouring rain.
Quiet here, isn't it? In the observation car.
Look there, the glimmer of one radiant lonely star.
"Would you like a drink even though the hour's late?"
"I don't believe I know your name."
"Won't you call me Kate?"

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Heartbreaker
BY ED GORMAN

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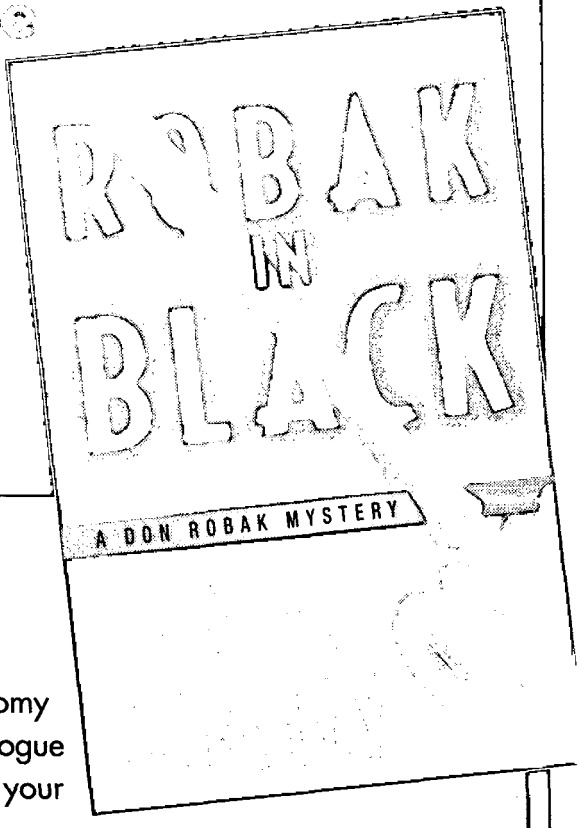

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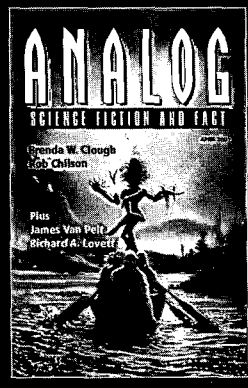

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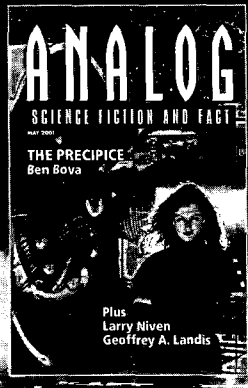

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